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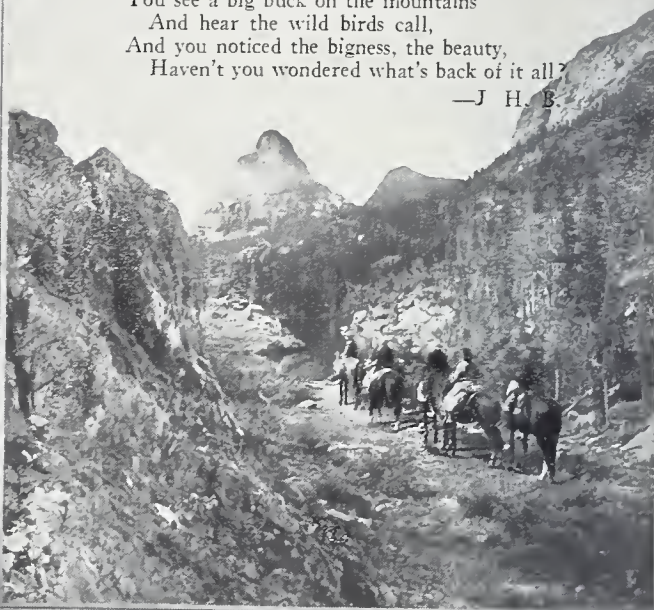
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RANGER DISTRICT NUMBER FIVE

HAVE you gazed on big dizzy mountains,
With deep, dark valleys below?
Have you spent the night in the forest
So still you could hear it grow,
Have you climbed on the tops of the foothills,
Where the vision ranges free,
And seen the pines and the hemlocks
As far as the eye could see?

Have you followed the trail in the summer,
Sung a rag-time song on the hill,
The smell of the pines all about you,
The sunshiny woods all athrill?
You see a big buck on the mountains
And hear the wild birds call,
And you noticed the bigness, the beauty,
Haven't you wondered what's back of it all?

—J. H. B.



Ranger District Number Five

By

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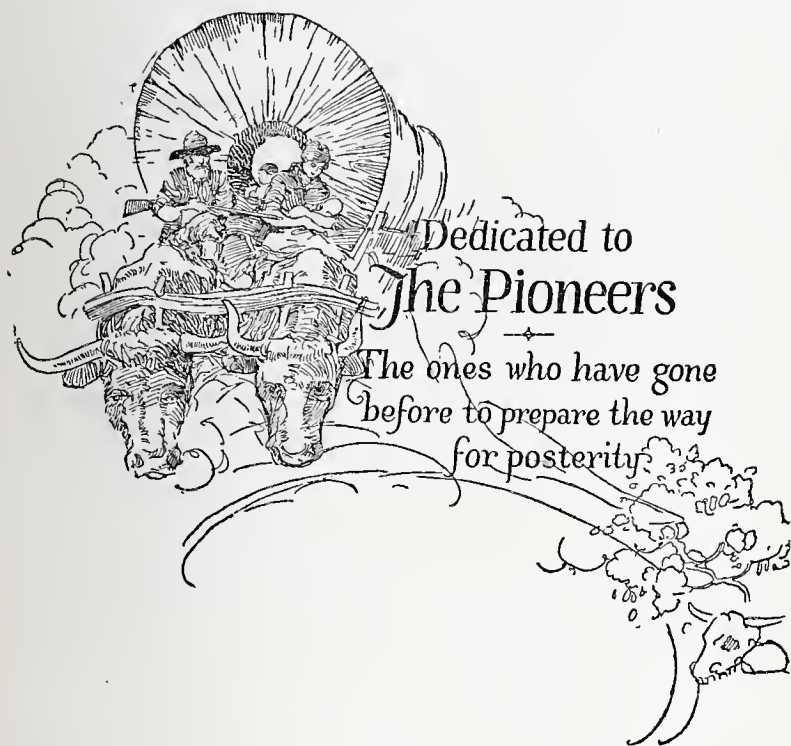
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PREFACE

Since the earliest days the meeting and subduing of the forces of Nature have stimulated the courage of mankind, and have given fire to the flame of ambition for mastery. This struggle with the elemental forces has doubtless contributed much to the temper and zeal of the American people, and has given them courage to meet any problem of national as well as of individual life.

And so it is not surprising that the Southwest should have developed men of unusual activity and power. The very grandeur of the landscapes and the relentlessness of Nature could not but leave their impress on the minds and souls of those who traversed the gigantic forests and seemingly endless plains, and daily experienced the life where strength and power are essential to existence.

Such were the conditions faced by the early Forest Rangers of the Southwest, and, while their lives were largely lacking in the sentimentalism that we know as romance, the life of hardship had a romantic color and fascination inherent to the atmosphere of the mountains and forests.

The stories herein related attempt to portray that life and spirit as they were found on the Western Ranges a few years ago. Many of the characters are honored citizens of the Southwest, though they might not be readily recognized in the garb in which they appear in this story.

This book is the result of an accidental acquaintance—now a lasting friendship—with an ex-forest ranger, Arthur J. Wells, who was staying at the same hotel in New Mexico while the writer was engaged in the work of a County Agent.

Many an hour was spent talking over the past, present, and future of that country. One evening he related the experiences of some of the early rangers on the forests with which he was familiar. One story followed another in quick succession, bringing out pictures of range life that were most entertaining. On another evening he con-

tinued these stories, and such was their interest that they seemed worth recording in printed form.

When these stories were first told by Wells, they were most fascinating to me, and, while I have written only a small part of them, I trust you will find them as interesting to read as they were when I first heard them.

HUNTER S. MOLES.

STATE COLLEGE, NEW MEXICO.

November, 1923.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

Ortega—The old patron or Mayor Domo* who practically owns the country and its people, and makes the rangers so much trouble.

Tom Cady—Ortega's bodyguard, who does most of his dirty work. He is also the deputy sheriff and proprietor of the town tavern.

Casper and Thorne—Soldiers of fortune and the first rangers.

Old Mack—The Forest Supervisor.

Mr. Ensley—The inspector, who learns a lot about the West.

Mr. Hamilton—The English nester who lives in the mountain valley.

Virginia—Berger's Girl, the daughter of a white settler.

THE RANGERS THE STORY IS LARGELY WOVEN AROUND

Hardy—The deliberate, honest, careful ranger.

Berger—The clean, good-natured, conscientious lad.

Brewster—The lightning speed thinker and actor.

Blair—The typical, laughably funny cattleman.

Dennis—The make-believe bad Western gunman.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. and Mrs. Ashton—Virginia's father and mother.

Dick and Harry—Tenderfoot rangers who are initiated.

Card and Gilson—The last rangers, who replace the old men.

The Caporal—The mule-riding superintendent of the sheep herders.

Mr. Martinez—A sheep herder.

The Barmaids—Who tend bar for Tom Cady.

Wilburn—Berger's rival.

Young Medical Student—A temporary rival.

Jack Gordon—Foreman of one of the nearby cattle companies.

Thane—The forest fire lookout guard.

* MAYOR DOMO—From the Spanish *Major Domo*, meaning the king or boss of a small territory, district or kingdom.

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CHAPTER I

THE MAYOR DOMO

Old Ortéga sat in the office adjoining his store, reading the weekly mail. Suddenly he threw the papers to his feet and gazed blankly out of the front window as if in deep thought. From the window he could have seen the row of adobe huts in which his servants lived, arranged in a square about the court and forming the typical Mexican plaza. All were surrounded by a high adobe wall, which had long since served its purpose as a protection against raiding Indian bands, and now shut off the view of the surrounding country, save on the east side where the forest covered mountains rose to a height of some twelve thousand feet.

But Ortega was gazing with his mind's eye and could see out and beyond this wall on every side. On the plains to the west, he saw his herds of thousands of cattle and hundreds of ponies. A little farther to the south he saw his flocks with their tens of thousands of sheep, peacefully grazing on the public domain, carefully watched over by his faithful peon herders.

The winter was over and spring advancing. Soon the watering places on the plains would be drying up and even now the stock were gradually working up into the foothills. Later they would go into the mountains,—climbing as the season's vegetation advanced.

In the little valleys, along the streams in the foothills, he could see other peons with their small flocks of goats near their placetas, and near at hand little patches of frijoles, chili and Indian corn, tended by the señoras and chiquitas while their husbands and fathers were away herding the sheep and cattle of their master, Señor Ortega.

The products of the labor of all these people belonged to Ortega as fully as the increase of his own cattle and sheep. The people themselves were in debt to him at the

store and all they produced above their frugal living was his. To him they were his property the same as the cattle, the sheep, and the ponies.

So long had he exercised absolute dominion over all he surveyed that the very plains and mountains seemed to him to be his by right of conquest. The struggle to obtain supremacy had been long and hard. He had led his people against the Indians and had subdued them. He and his clan had fought others of his own race and their clans, until he had completely established his superiority by the law of the survival of the fittest.

Ortega was the natural born leader of his people, and they looked to him as their supreme ruler and Mayor Domo, or Master,—some faithfully and cheerfully, some fearfully, some sullenly, but none daring to rebel. White men desiring the range for their stock or attracted by the lands and timber had tried to gain a foothold in the neighborhood, but they too had always been thwarted in their plans. First their stock would disappear and one misfortune after another befall them in rapid succession. In short, Ortega's country had been no place for a white man, and for many years this had been recognized even by the most adventurous among them.

Even beyond his horizon was his power beginning to be felt. Did he not control the votes of a large section of the territory? Had he not chosen representatives in both houses of the Territorial Legislature? Did he not name all the petty officers of his county? In fact, his shrewd cunning and sound sense had been felt to some extent in national affairs. Did not the Territorial Delegate to the United States Congress owe to him his appointment? Why then should he look blankly from his window with a troubled expression on his brow?

While he was still in deep meditation, a peon rode up with a couple of pack burros to obtain provisions for one of the sheep camps. Ortega beckoned him in and with well chosen words told him the reason for his deep thought. He did not, however, disclose to the peon that he was troubled any more than would a great general

show that he was disturbed in the presence of a new enemy.

He began his discourse to the peon with the familiar "Buenos dias, amigo." And after a few preliminary remarks he continued—though of course in Spanish, for the peon knew no other: "Once more it is necessary for me to protect you from the greed of the Gringo. He is trying now to take away your lands, your timber, your fields, and your flocks. In his mad thirst for power he hopes to win the homes of the poor Mexicans. This he intends to do by confiscating your fields and making of these mountains and plains a Forest Reserve. Even the President of the United States has taken his side.

"The greed of the Gringo threatens to bring ruin upon all of us, but I shall protect my people as I have fought intruders in the past. In my fight for your welfare I shall expect the loyal support of all my faithful people."

He went on to explain that, while he was loyal to the American Government and expected all his people to be, he intended to fight for the rights of his people politically, and in every other way in his power, to prevent the Gringo of the East from driving them from the lands of their forefathers. He was determined to exert every effort to protect them in the peaceful possession of their homes and flocks, which were theirs by right of inheritance from past generations.

As he talked, his eloquence waxed hotter and hotter until it became an incoherent raving. He had accomplished his purpose, however, for the peon had believed every word and became more excited than his master. He pledged his support and that of his camp and community, for he was influential among his class, being the chief herder over all the other herders in Ortega's employ.

Ortega had only to repeat this performance with a few others of the most influential peons, and he had his people thoroughly aroused against the threatened invasion of the Gringo and his latest move to rob them of their natural heritage. Conscious and egotistical as he was of his great power, he knew that it alone was of little avail in his

fight against Uncle Sam's invasion of his realm. He believed that he could eventually have the "Reserve" abolished through his great political influence; but he had insight enough to realize that he was locking horns with a stronger opponent than he had ever fought before, and, when alone, his brow often wore a troubled expression.

As the spring advanced, his flocks and herds moved gradually into the mountains and grazed along the mountain valleys as usual. Nothing had occurred to substantiate the newspaper report regarding the "Forest Reserve", and the excitement of the people over the incident had died down. Even Ortega began to rest easier again, in the hope that after all he might not be molested in his little kingdom.

He did not realize that there were not enough trained or competent men available to put all of the many newly created National Forests under immediate supervision,—a task so great that bureaucratic machinery of no small proportions had to be developed and plans worked out, all of which required time.

CHAPTER II

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE

The summer rains were over. Mother Earth was clothed in luxuriant vegetation in the early stages of maturity. Nature was surely outdoing herself in a gorgeous display of wondrous beauty. The mountain air was fresh with the tang that puts fire and enthusiasm into young blood and lures into unknown paths.

Toward evening of a fine sunshiny day in August two white men camped at the head of one of the many mountain streams. Their saddle horses were hobbled and were allowed to graze on the plentiful mountain grasses. The men angled the stream, bringing in a string of shiny rainbow mountain trout, which they broiled over the quaking aspen coals of their camp fire and ate with relish, along with some strong coffee, and a sort of hard-tack which they had taken from their carrying cases.

Their complete camp outfit could be very quickly described. For cooking utensils they had a miniature frying pan, which was still tied to one of their army saddles, as they had preferred to broil the fish over the coals, and a tin can which served as a coffee pot. As they sat down to eat, each pulled from his inner coat pocket a small leather case containing a collapsible cup and a combination knife, fork, and spoon. Pouring the coffee into the cups, they sipped it from their spoons. From the rapidity with which the food disappeared it was evident that keen appetites were not lacking. The ozone-laden air ten thousand feet above sea level and the day's ride over the mountain trail through the most wonderful scenery God has created served as tonic enough. Silence reigned supreme until their appetites were nearly satisfied, which seemed to loosen the tongues of the men.

One important detail was omitted,—just before attack-

ing the meal each had drawn a small flask from some safe pocket and poured a small portion of its contents into his folding cup, and this perhaps added somewhat to the tonic above mentioned and may have been partly the cause of loosening their tongues as the meal was nearing completion.

They were used to new and strange experiences. Having just completed a term of service in the Philippines,—their latest adventure,—they had been rewarded by Uncle Sam with appointments as Forest Guards on one of the newly created National Forests in the Southwest. And now they were on the way to their ranger district,—a new experience, and one that promised to be a pleasant adventure.

Casper, the younger of the two, started the dialogue by remarking that the trout were not so bad after all, and wondering if the sleek cattle grazing up and down the valleys would not be a close second in quality of meat. He then suggested that he might try his hand as a second Buffalo Bill and procure some of this meat by the aid of his trusty rifle. For breakfast they could have tenderloin, and he described in detail what an appropriate and savory breakfast food that would be.

Bob Thorne, who had learned more in the school of experience, laughed tolerantly. For his part he could eat fish three times a day for a while without even a yearning glance at any form of beef. He smiled to himself, and then, laughing at the thought, he asked: "What would the greaser who happens to own this animal say if he should witness the slaughter thereof by one Buffalo Bill number two, or our feast on his beef in the early morn, as you suggest? The possibility of there being such a witness now observing our every action from cover of yonder thicket is not remote. Remember, we crossed a pony track or two away back. And, say, by the way, Cass, I believe a more appropriate stunt for you to settle your supper would be to bring those horses in and picket them close to where we will roll our blankets for the night. Eh, Cass, eh?"

Rising and saluting soldier fashion, Casper departed on his detail of picketing the horses for the night.

On returning from picketing the horses, he remarked: "Your old middle name 'Precaution' is showing up again I see, Bob. Must be you scent the enemy. Far be it from me to make serious jest regarding your good old name, 'Precaution',—which saved my wooden block from the bolo of a dirty little Filipino on one particular occasion to my personal knowledge, and the good Lord only knows how many other occasions of which I have not such particular and vivid knowledge. But I sure would enjoy a little beef for breakfast, Bob, just for the pure unadulterated deviltry of the thing."

Bob laughed and yawned, as he remarked: "That grouse we had for dinner suited my palate well enough. Let's be content with the small game of the season until greater necessity for adventurous foraging demands some brave exploit on your part."

"Mr. 'Precaution', I do believe you are scenting the enemy. I really wonder if we are to take seriously the little tip the Supervisor gave us about always riding together over here, when he said that we would be in a country just like the heart of Old Mexico."

"Some of those yarns spun by the old nester we stayed with last night seemed to corroborate the Supervisor's impression," Bob sleepily remarked.

"Damned if they didn't," returned Casper. "I didn't pay any particular attention to the old duffer's narratives; but, if I remember correctly, he said there were only one or two white men in the country after we got over this range, and one of those was the bodyguard of the Mayor Domo. He said, too, that this Americano was the deputy sheriff of the county, by virtue of the political power of the Mayor Domo, and that whenever a white man appeared in the community, Mr. Sheriff was sent to arrest him on some trumped up charge, and usually made quick work by shooting the prisoner when he attempted to escape."

Thorne, yawning again, remarked: "I have heard that

that is the very commonest of Mexican tactics and no doubt it is true. But say, Cass, what do you say to spreading out our blankets on this nice green carpet and 'rolling in'?"

.

In the morning, just as the sun peeped over the spruce rimmed horizon, they "rolled out"; and, while Thorne was starting the fire and saddling the horses, Casper caught the trout for breakfast; and soon they were on the trail traveling along the little stream. As they descended, the little valley gradually deepened and assumed the aspect of a cañon. Then it narrowed to a mere causeway for the stream to flow through, with barely room for the narrow trail along the base of the perpendicular walls of granite which rose on either side to a height of a thousand feet or more. Finally the trail led to the middle of the stream, there being no room for it on either side.

The splashing of the water over the rocks echoed and re-echoed from one rocky wall to the other, with a rumble which reminded the ex-soldiers of the roar of distant artillery.

Suddenly they passed out of the gorge, as if into a different country, and for a moment the sight that they beheld struck them dumb. The horses raised their heads, and with ears forward stopped of their own accord, surveying the scene with undoubtedly as much wonder and pleasure as did the men.

They stood for several moments taking in the view. Before them lay one of the prettiest of mountain valleys, —the bottom land carpeted with green grasses. The forest covered ridges on either side rose to the very sky,—near the bottom the oak brush, a shade darker than the grasses; a little higher up the quaking aspen of an entirely different hue; higher still the pine and red fir; then an occasional white fir with its silvery needles glittering in the sun; and on the sky line the dark fringe of the Englemann spruce. Along the stream in the grassy valley



"Before them lay one of the prettiest of mountain valleys."

grazed thousands of fine white sheep. Their herders were, however, nowhere to be seen.

Casper as usual broke the silence. "I thought I had seen some of the pretty places on this old earth, but I'll be damned if I ever saw anything that could be compared with this."

After another minute of silence, Casper again spoke: "They surely don't leave these sheep here to graze by themselves, without any protection from the wild animals."

"I have an idea, Cass, that the herders, expecting our arrival, have taken to the brush to observe better. Probably they haven't seen white men lately, and they want to give us the once over from under cover, in true Mexican fashion. But what you say about this scenery I fully concur in. I never knew before that God had ever displayed his hand in this manner."

"It is a shame that these dirty little greasers should occupy this paradise. This is what I call a white man's country. But, Bob, what makes you think the herders were expecting us? Scenting the enemy again, I suppose?"

Bob replied shortly: "Didn't you notice the pony tracks, fresh in the trail, coming down this morning? They came in just above the gorge. Probably belonged to the measly little 'spics' that were watching our camp last night, and I just imagine that they have tipped off the whole mountain side by this time."

"Say, Mister Bob Precaution Sherlock Thorne, take the lead! I will humbly follow your scoutship down into the valley of the enemy."

They rode down the beautiful valley, feasting on the scenery, admiring the sheep grazing so peacefully in Nature's very bosom. Casper ventured a remark once that a mutton chop would taste good for dinner, but conversation was limited.

A few miles of this and the valley narrowed again, and the trail turned to the side through the timber. As they

entered the forest, a pair of gray squirrels jumping from limb to limb crossed the trail just ahead. Thorne pulled out his automatic, and the first shot brought one to the ground. The other took to the opposite side of the tree, and, when it ventured to peek, Thorne shot again, but missed. The third shot, however, brought it to the ground, with a bullet hole through the head. Casper dismounted and quickly dressed the little animals, mumbling something about it being a brutal shame to murder such pretty little creatures when mutton was so plentiful.

A little farther down the stream they came out again into a broader valley than the first, and again they stopped and gazed in admiration and silence. Without speaking a word they dismounted, hobbled their horses, and, making use of their frying pan and a slice of bacon taken from the carrying case, they proceeded to fry the squirrels. A little more ranger experience would have taught them to boil the meat for a few minutes first; but they can be excused, for they were on their maiden ranger trip, and were what the cowboys would have called "tenderfeet".

Finally the meat was ready; and, as Thorne drew his flask to take his usual appetizer, he spoke with some show of interest. "I wonder what kind of fire water these people in the valley of our next experience are able to concoct. I have read that in Old Mexico they make a most delicious beverage from the cactus plant. There is no cactus in sight here, but that plain which we sighted to the west from the top of the ridge yesterday might afford such a luxury. It is not probable that we will get much of the imported American brands, as I understand they are ninety miles from the nearest railroad, and everything has to be freighted across the plain by wagon; but let us hope for the best, eh, Cass?"

Casper replied in a very positive manner, looking Thorne full and earnestly in the eye: "Now, Bob, remember your failings. I am absolutely dependent upon your middle name for my personal protection; and you know

as well as I do that, when you imbibe too freely, you invariably lose that middle name 'Precaution',—throw it to the winds, so to speak. So now just for the sake of my own personal protection I appeal to you to bridle that appetite of yours and keep your full name intact," reaching out his hand to shake. Thorne rather shamefacedly extended his hand, and they shook the hand of good fellowship and pledged over the little camp fire.

The squirrel was rather tough, but Casper did not grumble. After a smoke and rest they rode on down the valley. In the mid-afternoon they came upon a Mexican placeta with the huts arranged in a square surrounded by a high adobe wall, with only one entrance. This placeta was the exact counterpart of every other Mexican placeta, but it was a new sight to our rangers.

Save for a few ponies and flocks of milk goats with their dog herders, no inhabitants were in sight. Noting this, Casper remarked: "They must have known we were coming and taken to cover."

"They are giving us the once over all right," Thorne replied. "You notice those little portholes all around near the top of that wall. What a fine place to shoot from!"

At the placeta the trail changed to a wagon road, and as they rode on they came to small cultivated fields and occasionally adobe huts. They even began to see some people. Men and women were working in the fields.

Thorne remarked: "At last we have seen the enemy and are in their midst. Let me see, the Supervisor's orders were to ride about and take observations, making report weekly by mail regarding conditions as we find them, but to take no action without further orders. Well, there is nothing in those orders to prevent me trying some of the Español lingo that I absorbed from those brown Filipinos. I wonder if these shady people would comprehendo?"

So drawing up to a group of workmen in the field, Thorne began: "Buenos días, amigos."

After a short embarrassment he began to receive replies, and on passing the cigarettes around the tension was removed to a slight extent. The distance to the main placeta where the Mayor Domo lived was learned and the journey continued. However, they decided to camp on the stream another night and enter the Mayor Domo's majestic presence the following morning.

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT

Bright and early the next morning Thorne and Casper resumed their journey down the stream. As they had been descending for two days, the vegetation and scenery had been gradually changing. They were now below the zone of the bunch grass and pine. Tall and majestic cottonwoods bordered the stream. Along the irrigating ditches leading to the little patches of cultivated land, lines of willows grew. Grama grass and here and there a bunch of sagebrush appeared in the bottom land. A dense growth of oak brush with a sprinkling of cedar and piñon trees covered the hills, which shut out the view of the surrounding country on either side.

If God had transformed the atmosphere above them into a huge mirror, as he sometimes does over the plains, the mirage would have shown to our travelers a very jagged and broken strip of country; it consisted of foothills,—the battle ground of the mountains and the plains.

Here and there the forest crept bravely out along a sloping ridge to the very edge of the plain—only to be withered by the hot winds, the breath of the desert. Often a mountain stream flowed out boldly and joined its forces with others of its kind to form a mighty chorus, rushing on to dispute the power of the plain—only to be devoured by its thirsty sands.

Here all of the elements were at war, all products and victims of their environments. The fight for the survival of the fittest was as the struggle of one race of men against another for a place in the sun,—as one tribe fights another for supremacy, each a product and victim of its environment.

As the rangers emerged from the foothills, the little mountain stream which they had followed for the past

two days joined its waters with that of others, forming a small river. About two or three miles distant on the other side of the river could be seen the placeta for which the rangers were bound. While the river was quite wide, it was not deep, and the ford was easily made.

From the description of the Mayor Domo which the old nester on the mountain had given, Thorne and Casper were beginning to have some misgivings as to the skirmish line through which they would have to pass. They now saw many people working in the fields or tending their flocks and herds, and after several glances at the smoke from the placeta Casper ventured in soldier fashion: "I wonder what password will be demanded by the old general's pickets?"

"Well, let's go on," replied Thorne rather disinterestedly. "We will interview the old duffer anyway. We might as well introduce ourselves first as last. And, besides, we should drop into the post-office and mail a card to our commanding officer, telling him of our safe arrival."

A little later they passed a number of horsemen and teams. Everyone seemed to be going to town. No one asked them for the password, however, and in due time they arrived at the placeta.

Riding through the big gate, the new rangers presented a very unusual sight to the inhabitants. They were finely built men, and the army uniforms which they still wore seemed to emphasize their stature and magnificent physiques. Their mounts were larger, finer animals than the Mexicans had ever seen before, save perhaps the Mayor Domo's driving horses.

Of course, their coming had been well advertised by word of mouth throughout the whole neighborhood, and there was quite a crowd standing about the plaza, and especially in front of the post-office and store, to witness the arrival of the hated Americano,—the Gringo. Next to hatred, curiosity is, perhaps, the dominant sentiment among this people; but it is not improbable that a feeling of admiration may have filled the hearts of some of the

comely señoritas. Such would have been inevitably natural, for they had never before seen such men.

The rangers rode straight to the post-office and, speaking a few words of common salutation to those nearest, in the best adaptation of the Mexican language they could command, they passed into the building, walking with true soldierly bearing. Being soldiers of fortune and used to new and strange experiences, they did not fear the reception, whatever it might be. And, as they strode into the post-office on this occasion, the observers might readily have thought that they ruled the universe.

One would not have had to observe very closely to note that they made a strong impression upon the people. Hatred, fear, and admiration followed fast in the wake of curiosity.

Ortega stepped from his office, introduced himself, invited them in, and welcomed them to all the hospitality at his hand. In excellent English he inquired of their wants and offered his services, at the same time stating that he thought the creation of the "Forest Reserves" to be illegal, unconstitutional, a bad move on the part of the Government, which would only work hardship on Western people. Nor did he fail to make it plain to them that he was personally acquainted with many of the high officials at Washington, and was keeping in close touch with the great political movements of the Nation as well as of his locality and territory, and that he intended to fight the movement politically.

Drifting from political talk, he made inquiries regarding their experiences in army life, and narrated some incidents of his own youth when he served with the American troops in their last fights with the Indians.

An hour was pleasantly spent in this manner; cigars were passed; and, declining the kind offer to stay for dinner, they mailed their post card. After learning that the stage came only once a week, and that the post card would, therefore, not go out for several days, and that there had not been time to receive any mail that might have been sent to them from the Supervisor's office since

their departure, the rangers rode on with no definite notion of where they were going further than to seek adventure and to pass the time until evening.

After riding some little distance Casper remarked: "The old boy doesn't seem nearly as bad as he has been painted. I'd hoped that we might have a little excitement to-day, but instead of being in the midst of the enemy we seem to have landed in a haven of rest and tranquil monotony. There's no fight in him."

Thorne rejoined: "Things are seldom what they seem; but there is one thing that I am sure of,—he is no fool. He may have a little excitement in store for us yet at some time when we are not looking for or expecting it as much as we were to-day."

About two miles below the town they noticed an adobe building somewhat more modern in appearance and larger than any they had seen before. It was surrounded by a group of other houses or huts, and, on nearing it, they could see that it was some kind of a public place. As this village had been built since the Indian tribal wars were over, it did not have the outer surrounding wall typical of the other placetas. Over the door was a glaring sign in big red letters "Cantina".

"Hello!" said Thorne, "'Cantina' means liquid refreshments, if I am not mistaken."

Dismounting and entering the building, they were surprised to see some young and beautiful Mexican women tending bar. They ordered their drinks, and, while drinking the usual beverages leisurely and with satisfaction, they took in their surroundings. They were in a well and practically equipped barroom. The bar was not of mahogany nor was it highly polished, but it was substantially built of timber and hewn planks, and was large enough to accommodate some twenty drinkers at one time. The back bar in true proportion was heavily laden with bottles of liquor of many kinds.

A few unopened barrels of beer were standing in one end of the room. On the shelves over these was a goodly supply of smoking and chewing tobaccos of various kinds,

and even a few boxes of cigars. In the center of the room was a pool table. The open doors showed an adjoining room which was much larger and practically unfurnished except for a bench running around the wall. This no doubt was the dance hall.

The shining glasses and bottles casting their reflection in the huge mirror at the back of the bar were surely a pleasing sight to Thorne, and his fears of a shortage of imported liquors were quickly dispelled. As Casper caught the glance of one of the barmaids in the mirror, he thought he detected in her eyes a reflection of the admiration which he was well aware his own eyes must have portrayed.

Presently a white man made his appearance. He was perhaps fifty-five years of age, and a glance sufficed to show that he was a man of great brutal physical power. He looked over his visitors carefully, and in answer to their inquiry told them they could remain for dinner and feed their horses. In short, this was a public house, and they could remain indefinitely and receive the best accommodation afforded, if they had the price of one dollar a day apiece.

So the bargain was made, and the rangers proceeded to settle themselves in their new home and become acquainted with the pretty barmaids. A muchacho came in and inquired if they would like to have their horses cared for, stating that there was a large pasture into which they could be put. Thorne could understand Spanish sufficiently to catch the lad's meaning, and went with him to help care for the horses.

In a short time the white man—who is now introduced as Tom Cady, though our rangers received no such formal introduction—reappeared and stated that dinner was ready. They followed him into the dining room. On the table were a steaming hot pot of frijoles, mutton and chili, a large plate stacked high with tortillas, a pitcher of black molasses and another of goat's milk, a round cake of goat cheese partly sliced, a bowl of sugar, a pot

of hot coffee, and the usual knives, forks, spoons, plates, and cups.

The three white men ate alone, being attentively waited upon by first one and then another of the dark eyed señoritas. An elderly señora appeared once and urged them to have more coffee; so before the meal was over all the feminine portion of the establishment had availed themselves of the opportunity to size up the newcomers.

Cady was polite but rather disinclined to converse, and the half hour devoted to the meal was industriously employed by the three men in appeasing their appetites. The chili was rather hot for the untrained palates of our adventurers, but all in all the meal was greatly relished.

The meal over, the rangers returned to the barroom, bought cigars, and, as the afternoon wore on, they frequently sampled the various drinks. Thorne became in danger of losing his middle name, but a word or two from Casper temporarily saved it.

After supper—which was an exact duplication of dinner—the young men began to gather from the surrounding country side, buying drinks and chatting with the barmaids; the doors of the dance hall were thrown wide open, and the musicians appeared. The orchestra consisted of two instruments. Old Tom took his place behind the bar and let the maids join the dance. The revelry continued until midnight, and the rangers—especially Casper—found a strange fascination in the evening's entertainment.

As the days followed, the rangers rode out in all directions, looking over the points of interest, which consisted of small patches of beans, chili, and corn, but not much else. The women and children were cultivating the fields, while the men were away in the mountains looking after the cattle and sheep of their Mayor Domo, or freighting merchandise from the railroad.

In the course of a week or two they found one other white man besides their host. He was a farmer who had moved in the fall before, settling in the river bottom about

twelve miles south of the village. He had brought with him ten fine cows, a few hogs, a team, chickens, and household goods, and his only desire was to establish a home of his own where he could honorably support his family. He believed that he was entitled to as much of the public domain as was necessary for him to accomplish this purpose.

However, troubles had come thick and fast. One of his horses died suddenly and mysteriously. His chickens disappeared, and one by one his cows strayed away and he could find no trace of them. He attributed his misfortunes to Ortega and his agents, and he warned the rangers against Tom Cady, telling them that Cady was Ortega's tool, and that through his office of Deputy Sheriff he had rid the country of many would-be settlers who had been objectionable to Ortega.

As the rangers continued their ramblings, they found in the various placetas four more cantinas. The bartenders in these places were men, but all were equally anxious to serve the rangers with the very best brands of fire water, and life was less monotonous than had been anticipated.

They saw nothing openly hostile about the natives and began riding alone at times. Thorne so far forgot his pledge that he often came in at night entirely oblivious to his middle name "Precaution", and when in that mood he was haughty and overbearing to everyone he met. He had also chastised a few of the Mexican peons with whom he had had differences at the various cantinas. When his tongue was loosened by drink, he would boast of these affairs to Casper, exulting in his conviction that all other races were simply afraid of the white man. And, true enough, the Mexicans began to fear his arrival even more that they loved the money which he spent freely over the bar at their cantinas.

Casper soon lost interest in these expeditions and often loafed about Cady's place all day, chatting with the barmaids. He, too, had made his enemies among the young men who frequented the evening dances, and who were jealous of his popularity. It was also becoming more

evident from day to day that Cady was jealous of Casper's attentions to one of the maids for whom Cady seemed to have a particular liking.

Cady was absent a large part of the time, driving the Mayor Domo to and from his sheep and cattle camps, as Ortega never drove out into the country without him. Then a little later, thinking it about time to go to the Capital to frame up the fall political campaign, Ortega had to be driven to the railroad about ninety miles distant across the plain. With his fast driving horses the trip down was made in a day. Allowing the horses one day to rest, the return trip was made more leisurely.

This took Cady away for several days, and, when he returned, he was in a very sullen mood and was cruel and overbearing to all of his servants, but particularly to his favorite barmaid, with whom he seemed to have become greatly displeased.

The rangers were tiring of the monotony of their surroundings. The meals, which they at first enjoyed, were becoming very distasteful to them, as there was no change from day to day, except occasionally a steak or mutton chop for breakfast, but always with a copious sprinkling of chili and often of garlic, both of which condiments the rangers had now come to abhor.

Neither ranger spoke but rarely to Cady. Thorne began to drink more heavily and Casper wore a continual grouch. His old craving for new adventure was growing on him. One evening Casper came in too late for supper and found that Thorne had not yet arrived, which, however, was not strange. His day's ride had been uneventful, and his ever increasing thirst for excitement had not been satisfied. He did not mind missing supper, as the very thought of chili and garlic had become unbearable to him. At any rate, he hoped to have a little excitement from the evening dance.

The dance had not yet begun, and only a few loafers were about. On nearing the barroom, he heard a scream. Hurriedly entering, he found Cady brutally whipping his favorite barmaid with a riding whip.

Casper hesitated only a second and then advanced, commanding in an angry voice: "You let that girl go!"

Cady turned and replied with fury: "Say, when did you become manager of this place? You go to hell and mind your own business!"

Quickly stepping forward Casper said: "I intend to make it my business to see that you quit whipping that poor girl. You low-down imp of Satan!" The last words Casper fairly hissed.

Murder flashed in Cady's eyes as he reached for his gun; but he had scarcely loosened it in its holster when he found himself gazing into the threatening mouth of an automatic six shooter which Casper was holding within a few inches of his nose.

At the command "Drop it!" Cady's old forty-five fell to the floor with a thud, and his hands went above his head.

"Now!" said Casper sarcastically, "I will talk to you a little, you low-down brute. Some time in the dim past you may have been a man, capable of taking care of yourself among men in your own brutal fashion; but you have been bullying these greasers and whipping helpless women until you have so degenerated that you are now no more capable of dealing with men than is your old antiquated forty-five capable of coping with this modern automatic. I could have put six holes through you before you would have had time to have cocked that old smoke wagon of yours. You are just a dirty low-down skunk!"

While Casper was speaking, the expression on Cady's face had gradually changed. Intense anger had taken the place of abject fear. Never before had any man talked to him in this manner. As his fury became more intense, the veins on his temples stood out, emphasizing the low, retreating brow and bullet-shaped head. The cords and muscles of his short thick neck continued to swell until they seemed about to burst. His massive ivory white teeth showing through the drooping mustache gave his face the appearance of an angry bulldog, and the steel gray eyes plainly expressed murder.

The instant Casper ceased speaking, Cady replied: "Your talk is bold from behind that gun."

Without a moment's hesitation Casper tossed the gun into the corner. Cady immediately sprang forward with a terrible swing of his mighty fist. Casper nimbly dodged and landed powerfully on Cady's jaw, but it was like hitting a sack of sand or a huge rubber ball so far as any apparent injury to Cady was concerned. He was of such a build, heavy set, heavy muscled, that he could stand almost any amount of punishment without great injury.

Blows rained thick and fast, Casper landing often, but without much effect. One of Cady's terrible swings finally went home, landing Casper in the corner badly stunned. Cady stood grinning, although the blood was running from his bruised face.

Casper soon gained his feet and came back as fierce as ever. The fight ebbed and flowed as each successive round became a repetition of the first. Casper, being the quicker and slightly taller and more sparely built, was able to register much the greater number of blows, but no matter how hard he hit he could not knock Cady down.

Finally, however, after Casper had been knocked to the floor several times and Cady had stood grinning and waiting for him to recover, Casper managed to make an impression upon Cady's brutal countenance by caving in a row of front teeth at the expense of a badly cut knuckle. This angered Cady to ferocity, and the next time Casper went down Cady rushed upon him, doubtless with the intention of killing him. The cat had played with the mouse long enough!

Casper had been conscious for some time that it would be better for him to clinch his opponent and get within the circle of his big swings. But as long as Cady stood up and fought like a man, allowing him time to recover from each fall and get up, Casper had been too good a sportsman to introduce unsanctioned tactics,—wishing to defeat Cady at his own game or take his punishment manfully as the case might be.

While Cady's training was evidently that of a pugilist,

Casper had at one time acquired great skill as a mat wrestler. As a matter of fact, he had taken a kind of post graduate course in this art from a Japanese instructor, and had learned the tricks of the jiu-jitsu. So when Cady pounced upon him while he was in a very exhausted condition, his science came into play. He knew just how to grapple Cady's muscle in a manner to weaken and unnerve him. In this way he held Cady at bay until he could recover his breath and reserve strength. Suddenly he raised his knee and by some trick of his art threw Cady high into the air, and, jumping to his feet, he again clinched Cady before he had time to get in one of his heavy swings.

Now a battle royal began. Cady was no mean antagonist as a wrestler. The room seemed scarcely large enough to contain the combatants. Back and forth over the bar they went. There was a shower of broken bottles and glasses as the back bar toppled over, liquid refreshments flowing over the floor.

At last Cady came down among the debris, Casper on top with a hold that was both slowly breaking Cady's shoulder and strangling him. Casper held him there helpless within his power, and watched his face blacken and his huge muscles quiver until limp.

It had been quiet in the room for several minutes, seemingly, since Casper had completely overpowered Cady, and the crowd of flunkies which had congregated outside ventured to enter cautiously. One of Cady's most faithful peons slyly picked up a bottle of beer from the floor, and, creeping up behind Casper, dealt him a terrible blow on the back of the head, which immediately blotted out his consciousness.

Then the others crowded in. Under their solicitous administration, Cady began to recover. Cold water was thrown in his face and brandy poured down his mouth. Everyone supposed that Casper had been killed. Cady was so nearly dead that he had no desire to do Casper further harm. When he had sufficiently recovered to be

able to speak, he instructed the men to carry him to his bed, which they did.

No one thought of calling a doctor, as there was none nearer than the railroad. To have called for medical aid would have been a most unusual and unheard of occurrence. And apparently the priest was not needed for either Cady or Casper. They merely examined the former for broken bones and decided there were none except for the missing teeth, so they continued to administer brandy until he was in the land of slumber, while Casper lay where he had fallen.

CHAPTER IV

THE RETREAT

While Casper was lying unconscious on the barroom floor, Thorne was stretched out on the floor of a log cabin in a similar condition, except that his unconsciousness was caused by a too free indulgence in the fiery Mexican beverage called "mezcal". When he awoke the next morning, he was dazed by his surroundings for a few moments, until his mind cleared somewhat, and he recalled the events of the previous day. He noticed that his six shooter was missing, and, becoming conscious of an intense thirst, he wondered if he had also lost his flask; but, no, it was safely reposing in its usual pocket.

After taking a very liberal eye opener, he arose and examined his surroundings more closely. There was no window in the room, the only light coming in between the logs, which had never been chinked. He tried the door, but found it was locked from the outside.

By this time Thorne was fully awake and in the possession of his wits, realizing his predicament. Immediately he began to search for a means of escape. In one corner of the room he found a plow and several other implements, which showed that this was a store-room for such tools. Spying among these articles an old cradle scythe, he appropriated it to chop a hole through the door, so that he could crawl out.

As he stood on the outside, the old exultant feeling of victory came over him. His eye opener was producing the stimulation which called for more excitement. He again reached for his flask and drained it, and then walked with a bold stride towards the central plaza carrying the scythe with him.

On spying him, the few Mexican loafers immediately scurried into the nearest huts. Noticing this, Thorne

thought it would be great sport to patrol the streets and keep them all inside, where to him they seemed to belong.

In view of the events that had occurred the day before, it was not surprising that the Mexicans feared him. For a week or two prior to this incident Thorne had been drinking more heavily day by day, and, as he made his rounds of the various cantinas, he had been most boisterous and overbearing, chastising whoever came within his reach or dared to cross his will. On the preceding day, in the cantina of the main placeta, he had at last found the drink concocted from the cactus plant.

It had crazed him to such an extent that his thirst for adventure, excitement, and amusement could be satisfied only by shooting at the dogs on the street, boot heels of pedestrians, tin cans, and anything else which appealed to him as a target. However, the pedestrians and dogs, getting more than their share of the adventure and excitement, and none of the amusement,—not having sense of humor sufficient to enjoy the joke,—hurriedly disappeared from view.

When he entered Ortega's store and continued these tactics, the clerk had timidly asked him to go out. Thorne replied thickly that he would leave as soon as he had secured some articles that he wanted, and, stepping behind the counter, he began to throw canned goods out through the front windows.

The clerk immediately dispatched a messenger for Deputy Sheriff Cady to come and arrest him. After a few minutes, however, the messenger returned and reported to the clerk that Cady and the other ranger had had a terrible fight, in which the ranger had been killed, and that Cady was so badly beaten up that he was in bed and unable to come.

After Thorne had tired of his destruction in the store, he went out upon the street again, still looking for new excitement. There were not many men about the placeta, most of them being in the fields following their usual occupations. Such as remained were in abject fear of Thorne, as well they might be while he continued in his

destructive state of mind. It was a great relief, therefore, when the white farmer came up the creek and drove into town.

As he walked into the post-office, the clerk begged him to try to calm the ranger in some way and get him into the jail for the night. He found Thorne still patrolling the town; but after talking and reasoning with him a few minutes he finally persuaded him to give up his gun and go to the cabin, where he would be safe for the night. The farmer promised to return his gun to him in the morning.

By this time Thorne had so overdone himself that he was exhausted, and he was glad to have a safe, secluded spot in which to sleep off the effects of the mezcál.

This explains why Thorne was in the jail when he awoke the following morning, and why his presence on the street had struck the loafers with such fear. Nor did he have time to tire of his occupation of policing the streets when Casper rode up.

Casper, whose face plainly showed that he had been in battle during the preceding night, had awakened toward morning from the unconsciousness caused by the beer bottle. After rubbing his stiffened limbs to find out if he had any broken bones, he discovered he was still intact, although decidedly the worse for his experience of the night before, the memory of which now flashed through his mind, event after event in quick succession, and he wondered where and how his adversary was.

Feeling cautiously around the wrecked barroom, he found his automatic, and with it came a feeling of much greater security. His eyes were swollen almost shut, his lips cut—in fact his face was a mass of bruised flesh. He bathed it alternately with water and whisky, and, taking a liberal portion internally, he began to feel like himself again.

Wondering whether Thorne had returned, he slipped quietly out to the little hut which had been their sleeping quarters since stopping with Cady, only to find that he

was not there, nor was there any evidence of his having been in that night.

This alarmed him, and he started at once for the pasture, his stride plainly denoting that he had decided upon a course of action and was going to carry it out resolutely. Day was just breaking, and he could discern a group of horses in the pasture. As he passed the corral, he filled his hat with oats and took a lariat rope, and in a surprisingly short time he had his horse under the saddle and was riding at a brisk gait for the main placeta. As he entered, the quest of his search was the only human being in sight.

He rode up to Thorne, and for a few moments they surveyed each other in silence. What may have been their mental comments we shall not attempt to relate. They held a short consultation, however, each relating his latest experiences. It was evident that, if Cady was physically able to be up to organize and head a posse, they would have the whole population to fight, and in their present condition they did not feel equal to such a battle. Besides, their thirst for adventure had been fully satisfied for the time, and the decision reached at this brief council of war was to retreat in good order.

Thorne did not know what had become of his horse, but, just as he was about to begin his search, the farmer appeared at the gate leading the horse and bringing his gun. As he neared the rangers, one glance was enough to show that they were not only completely sobered, but in a very earnest mood, so he immediately returned the horse and gun to their owner.

Shaking the hand of the farmer and wishing him the best of luck, they bade him "adios", wheeled their horses, and passed quickly out through the big gate. In a few hours many miles separated them from the scene of their late unpleasantness.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, as they were drifting over the plains at a double quick gait, Casper noticed the parched and swollen condition of Thorne's

lips, and remarked with a sarcastic smile: "I suppose, Bob, you are not neglecting to admire the luxurious growth everywhere surrounding us of the cactus from which the Mexicans concoct the delicious beverage known as mezcal."

Thorne could scarcely moisten his tongue sufficiently to reply, but his eyes flashed fire, and, when he did speak, it was the stern command, "Shut up, damn you!"

From past experience Casper knew that when Thorne spoke in this manner it was time to stop jesting.

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A few days later, just as the sun was setting, the rangers emerged on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Their dripping and panting horses stood with spraddled legs, tired and gaunt. The men looked straight ahead far over the plain at the hazy outline of the distant mountains,—not a living thing in sight.

Casper, turning in his saddle, said: "Let's camp."

And Thorne answered, as he slowly and wearily dismounted: "Bueno."

CHAPTER V

THE FOREST RANGERS

On returning from his trip to the capital, the Mayor Domo found the community in an uproar over the actions of the departed rangers. Soon, however, everything was again moving along in the old accustomed way. The excitement caused by the forest rangers—the hated Gringos—had died down, and their misdeeds had been dismissed from the minds of most people.

But neither Old Ortega nor the Forest Supervisor had forgotten that the little kingdom over which the former had so long held undisputed control had been proclaimed a part of the National Forest, and that the Government at Washington would expect the rules and regulations governing such forests to be put in full force.

While in the capital Ortega had joined with others of his kind,—cattle and sheep barons, lumber men and politicians, all of whom were prospering by the free use and exploitation of the Nation's natural resources,—and they had discussed ways and means of having the proclamation set aside so as to eliminate Government supervision, which they well knew would be greatly to their disadvantage, as it interfered with their accustomed practices. They employed the most capable counsel and prepared complaints and petitions to be presented to the next Congress. As representative of these interests, Ortega had begun his campaign for election to the Senate of the Territorial Legislature.

The Supervisor had in the meantime been planning ways and means of enforcing the rules and regulations relative to the National Forests. He knew it would be not only worse than useless, but also dangerous, to send inexperienced men again into Ortega's territory. He had

been searching among the applicants for ranger positions for men of the right type to send to that district.

Thorne and Casper had been of an extreme type and had served the purpose of acquainting the Mexicans with the dare-devil bravery of the white man. The natural fear which all other races have of the white race had been emphasized, and perhaps this was well; but nothing had been accomplished toward the enforcement of any of the forestry regulations whereby poor and humble men could share in the use of the forest resources, without dictation from anyone other than their own Government, which had at last come to protect them in their rights.

Finally, in the latter days of October again two white men rode down the little trail into the valley, through which Thorne and Casper had ridden a few months before.

The first autumn frosts had changed the colors of the forests, adding, if possible, to the splendor of the mountain scenery. The squirrels were busily engaged gathering the seeds from the cones of the fir, pine, and spruce, and storing them away for their winter's food. The range cattle and sheep were working their way slowly down through the valleys to the plain below, which would be their winter home.

All of this the newcomers saw with eyes so accustomed to such scenes that it called forth no comment. Admiration for Nature was a habit with them, and they wasted no words in talking about it to each other, but rode silently on, their horses traveling in single file, picking their way with the sure-footedness of the native mountain horse.

In the lead rode Ranger Hardy, the older man,—thirty-nine years to be exact, although he looked much older. The storms and suns of many climes had left their marks upon his face. His wide range of experience among men of many races and classes had marked his face with seriousness. In addition to the regular Forest Service uniform he wore an old pair of angora goatskin chaps,

from the belt of which hung in its holster an old style forty-five caliber six shooter—the recognized law of the frontier. On the bosom of his woolen shirt was pinned a little bronze badge with a pine tree engraved on it,—the emblem of the Forest Service.

On one side of his saddle horn hung a canvas bag—the Forest Service carrying case—in which he carried the “Use Book”, all of his official instructions, stationery, compass, etc.,—in short, it was his portable office. On the other side of the horn, just over his coiled lariat, hung a South African water bag. Under one knee, slung in its scabbard, was a thirty-thirty saddle rifle, and under the other knee a small axe, with the letters “U.S.” stamped on the back,—the Forest Service marking hatchet. Back of the saddle cantle a long yellow slicker was tied by the saddle strings.

Close behind followed his pack horse, laden with a month’s provisions, cooking utensils, bedding and extra clothing, and other supplies. Securely tied to the tail of the pack horse followed another horse. To-morrow it would be his turn to carry the pack, or perhaps his master. At least the pack horse of to-day would have a rest to-morrow and travel light behind the other two.

The equipment of Forest Guard Berger, the younger man, was much the same. He did not, however, wear the Forest Service uniform, as he had not yet passed the Forest Ranger’s examination and was therefore only a temporary, probationary employee. He was perhaps twenty-one years of age. The big yellow letter on his heavy sweater denoted that he had played on a college football team the year before. Though born and reared in the Southwest among a mixed white and Mexican population of stockmen and lumbermen, and thoroughly acquainted with the customs of these people, and with range and forest life, this was his maiden trip out into the world to meet and deal with men as a man. In striking contrast to the world wanderer Hardy, Berger was still just an overgrown boy anxious to learn the ways of the world.

At sundown they made their camp for the night on a grassy plot near the stream, hobbling all the horses but one, which was picketed close by the camp fire. When supper was over and the cooking utensils had been carefully washed and put away, they rolled out their beds. Then Hardy filled his pipe, and their thoughts turned to the field of labor upon which they were about to enter. Berger was the first to break the silence. Some things which the old nester on the mountain top had told them the night before had been hard to dismiss from his mind that day, and now he could not resist asking the older man his views on the matter.

"Mr. Hardy, what do you think of the stories Mr. Hamilton told us last night about?"—

Here Hardy interrupted him in his deliberate drawl: "There you go again 'Misterin'' me. As I told you before, Berger, we are to be pals. There ain't no handles to my name. Call me plain Hardy or Joe, or whatever you want to. Leave off the 'Mister'. What was you a goin' to say, kid?"

"Excuse me, Mis—er—I mean, Hardy, but I was about to ask you what you thought of the stories Mr. Hamilton told us about that man Tom Cady and his relations with Mr. Ortega and the rangers."

Hardy slowly puffed away at his pipe, gazing into the camp fire, taking his time to reply, as it was his habit to think well before he spoke.

Finally, just as Berger had about despaired of receiving any answer to his query, Hardy removed the pipe from his mouth and in the same deliberate drawl said: "I reckon what he said was based on facts. 'Course he had no direct information. Some of his yarns may have growed a little. Reckon he meant well in warnin' us. Probably believed what he told us. When Old Mack called me into the office and told me he intended to send me over here to this district, he said we'd run up agin' some snags. [Old Mack was the name by which the Forest Supervisor was affectionately called by his field

men. The "Old" was a prefix denoting their respect for his ripe experience.]

"The old Mexican, Ortega, has had control over this part of the country so long that he thinks he owns it. He's a goin' to put a few chunks in our road. The rest of the people seem to be simply ignorant peons. He owns 'em."

After this long speech Hardy paused to take a few puffs before continuing, and deliberated so long that Berger could not refrain from asking the question that was on his mind. "But do you believe that Tom Cady actually went to that ranger Casper's quarters and pulled him out of bed and beat him nearly to death?"

"Oh, Casper and Cady had a fight all right. But I heard a different story before coming over here,—that Casper beat Cady to a pulp. Thorne got into trouble too. I don't reckon anyone ever will know all about it. Old Mack seemed to think that perhaps the rangers were to blame for the trouble, but he said Cady was a bad man. Ortega uses him as his tool when he has some especially dirty work to do. For years no white man has been safe in Ortega's territory. You see he gives Cady the office of Deputy Sheriff, and then, whenever a white man comes into the country, he has Cady kill him. I have heard a good deal about his methods. Cady's a 'gun man',—probably a fugitive from justice,—and Ortega just employs him to further his ends.

"I don't reckon, though, he would dare kill Uncle Sam's officers. Ortega served several years in the American army, and he knows what it means to monkey with the Government. Old Mack says, though, that his political power has swelled his head. He expects we will have a pretty hard fight before we get things to goin' right over here. Ortega is no fool, however, and that may save him from goin' too far. If he knew Old Mack as well as I do, he'd give in now. Old Mack understands what he's doin', and I listened real close to his instructions. He says Ortega has already submitted a complaint

about the manner in which Thorne and Casper conducted themselves, and that he'll be watching us right sharp.

"All Mack wants us to do this winter is to ride the country and get up to date on conditions and report to him. But there is one thing certain, and that is, when he learns all the details of the situation, he'll make Old Ortega come across, whatever happens. Reckon we'll see a little excitement before we get through."

It was now Berger's time to think. When he spoke, there was an expression of relief in his voice: "Well, there is no use borrowing trouble from to-morrow. We can do what seems best from day to day, and then we will not experience trouble until we actually encounter it."

"You've said something, kid."

"Are we now in our ranger district, do you think, Mr. Hardy?"

The "Mister" had unconsciously slipped out again. Hardy slowly turned his gaze full into Berger's and made no reply to the query. Presently they both began to grin, Berger apologized and stated his query over.

Hardy replied: "Reckon so, kid. Old Mack said from the top of the range west. The west line ain't marked, but the proclamation map shows it to be some five or six miles west o' the foot o' the mountains. That's one of Ortega's strong points in his petition to have the Forest abolished. He claims it includes whole villages and farming communities and lands not suited to the purposes and regulations governing National Forests. It will be part of our work this winter to run out that line and blaze and post it with Forest Boundary notices."

"This is a fine grazing country," Berger again commented. "It does seem a shame for an old Mexican to have it all to himself, as you might say. Has he any more right to it than any other citizen?"

"Reckon so, kid. He is in possession. They say that is nine points of the law. But we are discussin' things too deep for us, crossin' bridges before we come to 'em. Them are matters for our superiors. They can better

decide. Pull that map out o' my carryin' case there and see if you can figure out where we are."

Berger did as requested and decided that they must be about halfway down the western slope of the mountain, on what was known as the Rio de los Cabras, or, in English, Goats River.

Upon receiving this information, Hardy yawningly remarked that to-morrow would see them at the end of their journey, and that they would choose a suitable place and establish a permanent camp.

Rolled snugly in their blankets, the men were soon sound asleep.

At break of day they were up and moving, preparing breakfast, and before long they had resumed their journey. A mile down the creek they came to the first placeta. Just as they approached, a half dozen cowboys came out through the gate, starting on their day's ride. Berger spoke to them in fluent Mexican, asking a few questions about the surrounding country. They answered his questions politely, in true Mexican fashion, but as keen an observer as Hardy could easily see that they were not welcome visitors to the community, and the thought passed through his mind: "Poor ignorant peons! they do not know that we are their friends."

They rode on down the valley, Berger repeating what he had learned: "They say there are a few little farms in the valley and another larger village below."

Hardy replied: "We had better ride along the foothills and find a smaller stream where there are no farms or villages to make our camp. Then our horses will not be troubling crops, and the grass will be better anyway. I don't care for too close neighbors."

Following his suggestion, in mid-afternoon they arrived at a spot which they thought exactly right for a camp. A chopping axe, a long handled, round-pointed shovel, and a Dutch hoe were unslung from the pack ropes, and the packs quickly removed from the animals. Then they pulled off the saddles and bridles and hobbled the horses.

Plain horse sense, whatever that may be, told the animals that they were at their journey's end. Their actions indicated this plainly. They had been traveling from sunrise to sundown for several days, and perhaps this unsaddling in mid-afternoon may have given them the tip. They hobbled a few paces away, lay down and rolled, and stretched their tired muscles, then rolled again, trying to rub the sweat from their bodies where the heavy saddles had pressed the hair down uncomfortably close. Springing to their feet, they shook themselves from head to tail and then relaxed completely. Leisurely making their way to the creek and wading into it knee deep, they stood and drank their fill of the purest of pure mountain water, after which they began to graze leisurely along the bank of the stream.

The men were busily engaged in the work of making camp. The heavy canvas—the outer covering of the packs—when unfolded proved to be a seven-by-seven tepee tent, with floor of the same material. On one side, beginning about eight inches from the ground, the sloping wall of the tent had a slit running nearly to the top. This was the door and only opening to the tent. Snakes, tarantulas, or centipedes would have a hard time finding their way into these little homes of our rangers.

Each man took his tent, and, spreading it upon the ground, drove stakes at the corners. The little rope which was attached to the apex of the tent, and formed a part of it, was then thrown over the limb of a tree which had previously been chosen for that purpose.

The roll of heavy woolen blankets encased in a heavy tarpaulin was put in the tent on one side. This bed roll also constituted a suit case, for between the woolen blankets investigation would have revealed the extra clothing of the men,—stockings, handkerchiefs, underclothing, shirts, towels, and many other small articles. Berger even had an extra suit of clothes, his best, and a white shirt and collar hidden away in the folds of his bed. Before Hardy put his bed into his tent, he unrolled

it and took from between the blankets an American flag which he laid carefully to one side.

Within the tent on the opposite side from the bed were stored the provisions. As these were taken from the panniers and stowed away in order, handy for daily use, an inventory would have been somewhat as follows: One small sack of flour, one of corn meal, and a smaller one of rice, small quantities of dried fruits,—apricots, raisins, prunes,—a few pounds of beans (more properly speaking “frijoles”, as they were the Mexican brown bean), a large slab of smoked bacon and one of salt pork, a few pounds of “jerky” (dried beef), pepper, salt, powdered red chili, coffee, sugar, a goodly supply of tobacco, a few bars of soap, a couple of cans of baking powder, and a half dozen cans of condensed milk. The cooking utensils consisted of a Dutch oven, two frying pans, three lard pails of different sizes so that they would telescope in packing, a few granite plates and cups, and steel knives, forks, and spoons.

In a surprisingly short time everything was in its place and the rangers lay down in the shade. Hardy lighted his pipe, and, after smoking for a few minutes remarked: “The horses stood the trip pretty well. Buck has a little sore on his back from the pack saddle. You just can’t get a pack to ride right on his back. That saddle doesn’t hurt the other hosses. Buck is a raw boned old son-of-a-gun anyway, but he sure has the stayin’ qualities.”

Here Hardy stopped to refill his pipe and after it was lighted again, he continued: “I rode the old rascal three hundred miles in four days last summer over the roughest trails in the Verde Mountains, and he was just as sure footed the last day as the first, but it certainly pulled the flesh off of ’im. I was a chasin’ a couple o’ hoss thieves that come through from the lower country. Was just gettin’ ready for bed one night when the Supervisor called up an’ said he had a message from the sheriff to pick those fellows up if they came that way. They had passed over a couple of days before by way of the Bear Mountain trail. I reckoned they’d go that way, so I

saddled up old Buck and put a little jerky in my pocket, and a fresh plug o' tobacco and billed in after 'em.

"It was moonlight, and Buck and me both knew the trails mighty well, so we traveled nights and laid around a while in the heat o' the day. Found their campin' places along the trail and knew I was gainin' on 'em. Just day-light on the fourth day, I rode into their camp as they were lightin' fire to get breakfast. They hadn't got the fire goin' enough to make much of a smoke, and I was almost as surprised as they were. But I got the drop on 'em all right and took their guns, put a rope on one of 'em and tied him to a tree, and had the other cook me up a real feed for breakfast. They had a good outfit, —plenty of chuck,—and I just thought I would enjoy life while I had the chance; and, as Buck needed a little rest and amusement as well as myself, I just kept one o' those doggoned sons-of-guns tied up to a tree and had the other cook for me. I'd go out with 'im and help 'im rangle the horses, and at night I just tied 'em both up and took a good snooze.

"That was usin' 'em altogether too good, for they were genuine old professional hoss thieves and should have been shot or hanged on sight; but, after Buck and I got rested and fed up a little, we took 'em on over to the county seat and turned 'em over to the United States Commissioner. I never did hear what he did with 'em. Buck is an ornery old devil, can't stand prosperity, but I would sure hate to part with the old cuss."

Having finished, Hardy puffed at his pipe in silence as he continued to think of past experiences, but he finally awoke to the fact that Berger had asked "Do you think these Mexicans are apt to interfere with our horses?" and replied, "Oh! I reckon we had better keep one or two of 'em picketed close to camp. I don't look for any trouble along that line for a while, but we hadn't better take any chances. I wouldn't care to be over in this God-forsaken country afoot. If you will go up the stream and catch a few trout for supper, I'll put 'Old Glory' up and boil the pot."

"All right, that's a good bargain," said Berger, as he went into his tent for a hook and line. He would cut a willow pole near the stream and find a few worms and grasshoppers. Reared in the mountains as he was, he had no doubt but that he could fulfill his part of the contract.

Hardy took his chopping axe and from a near-by thicket of young pine saplings selected and cut one suitable for a flag pole. Soon he had dug a hole, attached the flag to the pole, and hoisted it. After tramping the dirt around the base of the pole, he stood back with bared head and admired the beauty of the Stars and Stripes rippling in the breeze.

This done, he turned his attention to the preparation of the evening meal. As a first step, he dug a hole about three feet long by two feet wide and six inches deep, scattering the dirt around to prevent the fire from running, as the frost bitten grass was becoming dry enough to burn. Then gathering a few splinters of pitch pine with some dry cedar and piñon wood to put on top to form a good bed of coals, he had the foundation laid for cooking the meal. One of the small pails half full of water was set close to the fire, and a couple of handfuls of dried apricots were brought from the tent and put into it.

While the fire was burning down he took the shovel and dug a little trench around each tent, muttering to himself: "It may not rain again this fall, but we might as well be prepared for the worst." After that he returned to the fire, which was burning brightly by this time, and said aloud. "Believe I'll fix up a real feed for the boy. It's early yet, and it won't matter if the supper is a little late; appetite will be better."

About two hours later, in the cool of the evening, the two men squatted Indian fashion on their saddle blankets on either side of a slicker which had been spread on the ground for a tablecloth, and ate with keen relish their evening meal.

Omitting the French the menu was as follows:

Mountain Trout, fried in bacon grease and served with long strips of Crisp Bacon; Corn Bread, steaming hot—fresh from the Dutch oven; Stewed Prunes; Rice, boiled to a jellylike consistency, thickly studded with raisins and served with condensed cream and sugar; Fresh Hot White Rolls, broken and served with a thick covering of browned flour gravy, liberally sprinkled with small shavings of dried beef, and seasoned with black pepper, salt and red chili; a Turnover Apricot Pie; Hot Black Coffee; Piñon and Pine Nuts.

As soon as Berger could spare his mouth for conversation, he said: "This is what I call real life. Seems more like a picnic to me than anything else. Everything steaming hot but the pie, and it's stone cold. How did you manage it with only the one Dutch oven?"

"Oh, the pie was the first thing I made, and I put it up in the crotch of that tree with a bit of old burlap sack dampened and hung over it."

"The breeze and warm air evaporating the water cooled the pie, hey? We had something about that in physics class in school, come to think of it. But look at the stack of white bread. You must have kept that oven working double quick."

"I've lived in camp so much that I get tired o' hot bread, and so I made up enough to last a week. I like it better after it gets dried out anyway."

"And what's in the pail there boiling like mad?"

"While I was restin' between preparin' the various courses for supper, I picked over a few frijoles. We will want to eat to-morrow too, you know."

"Well, you take the brown derby as a cook. Why so long displaying your culinary art?"

"I like to hold some o' my best qualities in reserve, so that you will not tire o' my company. We are goin' to be pals, you know, kid. Some day I will cook you a real honest-to-goodness Sunday dinner. But when I am on the trail like we've been, I don't like to take the trouble to unpack everything to get a meal, and sometimes I come

most awful near starvin' to death, just as when I went after those hoss thieves, I fill my pockets with jerky and go ahead."

"The Forest Service furnishes some kind of emergency ration for such occasions, doesn't it?" asked Berger.

"That is what they call it. I had some of the stuff once and tried feedin' it to a bunch o' Mexicans fightin' forest fire. You know there is a kind o' meal that looks like white corn meal, but it's neither that nor finely powdered sawdust. But whatever it is, you can chew on a spoonful of it for an hour, or such a matter, before you can get it moist enough to swallow, and, if you ever get it down, you could drink the Amazon River dry. Those Mexicans chewed and chewed on that stuff and then started for a drink. I had some kids carryin' water, but they were too slow in gettin' around. A Mexican is none too spry anyway, and it was hotter than Billy Hell in August, and those Mexicans drank their ration of water after eatin' that stuff, and then made a bee line for the river, five miles away. It was comical, but no joke. 'Course the fire got the best of us."

"Is that meal all there is to the ration?"

"No, there is a little cake of chocolate. But that doesn't tend to relieve thirst any. For my part, I don't care for their damned scientifically prepared emergency rations. Give me a pocket full o' good old jerky and some dried prunes and a plug o' tobacco, and I can stay with any of 'em, and I don't have to have a dray haulin' water to me either. I have found that keepin' men supplied with water is just as important, if not more so, as food, when fightin' fire. Of course, a man can go a good deal longer without food than drink. We made a fizzle fightin' that fire. Got it out finally, but since then I reckon I've learned a thing or two about handlin' a bunch o' men on a fire line."

"Last year they had a fire over on the Highline Forest," said Berger, "and called on a bunch of us college boys to help fight it. We were out there ten days, and I will never forget the experience. Two of the boys were

trapped, and if it hadn't been for an old ranger, they would have been burned to death. He knew of another trail into the place, rode in there, and packed those fellows out on his horse, risking his own life. They all looked like singed rats."

Supper over, Hardy lay half reclining against his up-turned saddle which formed a support for his head and shoulders, puffing leisurely at his lighted pipe, apparently deriving great satisfaction from the fumes of the weed. It was dusk, but he could see the forms of the horses up the creek a short distance.

"Reckon I won't bring in the hosses until bedtime," he said. "The moon will come up early an' they're enjoying themselves. I hate to disturb them."

Berger cleared away the remains of the feast, saving the remnants and carefully storing them away in the tent. Then he scraped the plates, preparatory to washing the dishes and cooking utensils, and turning to Hardy said: "We will have what's left for breakfast. How will stewed prunes, corn bread, fried rice, coffee and milk be for breakfast? Oh, yes! and frijoles, I nearly forgot them."

The dishes washed, Hardy doing his bit with the drying cloth, the men lay down, and simply, naturally, and unconsciously drank of the bounteous wonders of Nature. There was no rumble of traffic and street cars or other city noises to disturb or distract their thoughts. The only sounds were those of Nature,—the rippling of the little brook, the calls of the wild life in the forest, the hoot of an owl or chorus of the coyotes, the murmur of the breeze stirring the foliage of the forest. No disagreeable odor of factory smoke, gasoline, or dust from a crowded street polluted the atmosphere. The fragrance from the pines, spruces, and falling needles blended to refresh it, giving strength, energy, life itself, to all who would partake.

In such an environment could men be other than natural beings? If left surrounded by Nature's wonders and gifts,—manifestations of God's beauty and power,—



"There was no rumble of traffic and street cars or other city noises to disturb or distract their thoughts."

but far removed from the civilizing association of others of their race, of community life, of family ties, of the influence of good women, how long would it be before these men would begin to degenerate, to revert to the primitive? How many weeks would elapse before they would neglect to shave?

Have you lived, as I have, on the frontier among a population consisting mostly of men where each seemed to compete with the other in disregard of personal appearance, wearing unsightly beards and long unkempt hair, even forgetting cleanliness of person,—speech being a kind of contest in profanity, debasing; personal adornment consisting of cartridge belts, six shooters and knives, mute evidences of degeneration; where low value is placed on life; prowess, yes, even popularity, represented by the number of notches on the gun stock; dissipation, everything, tending to cause a man to become degraded, degenerate, tough, be a “bad man”, revert to the primitive; the few degraded women worse than the men,—and witnessed the coming of a good woman into the community?

Perhaps she is a wife, a sister, or mother, or daughter of one of these men. First one man and then another hunts up his razor. Off goes his beard. He washes the back of his neck and ears, and brings forth his best clothes, perhaps he finds a starched shirt and white collar in the bottom of his trunk. He becomes a new man in appearance at least, out of respect for the good woman.

A few more good women come, a few families become established; you see children growing up; and behold the change in the standards of the community; schools, churches, civilization, follow.

As Hardy knocked the ashes from his pipe and strolled up the creek with lariat rope in his hand to catch a couple of the horses and picket them near the camp for the night, Berger alone by the camp fire pulled from an inner pocket a picture of the sweetheart he had left behind, and, as he held it in the light of the fire, his

mind strayed far away over the mountains to the environments of civilized society. He thought of home, mother, sisters, sweetheart, schoolmates.

And Hardy, as he gently slipped the rope around Buck's neck, voiced his thoughts half aloud. "Buck, here we are out in the wilderness again. I swore off from this life. Reckoned I'd go back East and hunt up the kin folks, and maybe settle down. [He did not mention to Buck that there was one not of any kin that he had thought long and seriously of hunting up.] But Old Mack made out he couldn't spare me at this time. He said I was just the man to straighten things out over here; that this country had to be opened up so it would be a fit place for a white man to live in. And so here we are, Buck."

Upon returning to camp he found Berger writing letters, and as he glanced at the boy a tinge of sadness came over him. He had no one to write to. Having left home when a mere boy, he had wandered the world over, making short-time acquaintances and friendships everywhere, perhaps never hearing of them again as he passed on to others in new places. He was not a letter writer anyway. That was out of his line. Often he thought of his old friends and wished he knew something of them, but no one knew of his whereabouts. Once in a while an old friend would by chance learn his address and write to him, but this did not happen often. Possibly his address would change before the letter arrived, and it would be returned to the writer, Hardy never knowing of it.

Before going to bed Hardy scraped the coals to one side of the fire pit with the shovel and dug a hole where they had been, putting a few live coals in the bottom and setting the pail of beans down on them.

"Where are those pieces of bacon, Berger? I fried them a little to get the grease when I was making the bread, and left them on a plate."

Berger produced the bacon, and Hardy laid it on the beans, and, putting the perforated cover on again, selected a few coals, put them on top, and covered it all over with

hot coals. Suppose a little ashes and charcoal did sift through into the beans, it would not poison them, and it might aid in their digestion.

Then taking his rifle from where it had been standing, sentinel like against a tree, Hardy put it in the tent back of his bed preparatory to "rolling in". To Berger he said: "You had better drop Old Mack a line to let him know we are on the job."

Berger put fresh fuel on the fire, and continued with his letters. To-morrow they would go to the post-office, and he must send a letter to his sweetheart and one to his mother, telling all about the trip,—how he enjoyed the company of his traveling companion, how he expected to enjoy his new work, not forgetting to tell the prospect of excitement and possible danger which might be ahead,—satisfying to the natural thirst for adventure in the red blood of a young man. And, as he sat there and wrote by the light of the camp fire, he pictured in his imagination the time not far distant when he would be a successful Forest Supervisor, perhaps, and in a position to establish a home with his present sweetheart as the happy bride.

Possibly he was too discreet to write of this. Only one deeply in love could appreciate what he wrote. The ways of a man with a maid have been given up to be incomprehensible by even the greatest intellects. As he wrote, a profound feeling of homesickness came over the boy, and he wished he could be with her that evening. Then he wrote his mother that his work might keep him away from home for a year, and tears filled his eyes. Poor, lovesick, homesick boy! He took a good-night look at and kissed the picture which he kept so handy, yet so deeply in his inner pocket.

Covering up the smoldering coals with dirt to prevent sparks from scattering, should the wind come up in the night, and to insure a good bed of coals to start the fire in the morning, his snore was soon in full accord with Hardy's.

CHAPTER VI

GETTING ACQUAINTED

This was the busy season of the year in the realm of the Mayor Domo—Ranger District Number Five. Early each morning Tom Cady drove up in front of his master's office,—always with a fresh team of driving horses, stamping, pawing, fretting to be off.

He never had long to wait. Ortega was soon at his side, the brake on the heavy mountain buggy loosened, and they were on their way, driving like mad. Horse flesh was no object. Perhaps this team would not be able to make another trip this fall. It did not matter if they were never able to make another day's drive. There were many more horses in his pastures. There would be a fresh team for the morrow.

This was the Mayor Domo's way,—one of his characteristics, the "pep" which had done much to set him on a pedestal above his people. He was an exception,—a very, very great exception to the ordinary, slow moving Spanish and Indian stock from which he sprang,—the exception which proved his superiority.

There was a world of work to be done before he could leave his business. The winter he must spend in the capital, serving his people as a legislator.

To-day he was bound for one of the cattle camps. A week earlier his cattle foreman had been instructed to have the cattle rounded up. He had been told to cut out the steers which were fit to go to market, also the old cows that would not winter well, and some of the heifers, too, that did not look like good breeding stock. This work had all been done the day before, but Ortega left final decision to no subordinate. He must see and judge each animal with his own eyes. As the cattle were driven past him, he quickly judged each animal, indicating

which was to be cut back to the herd. In the same manner he reviewed the herd which was to be held over for another year.

Then he called his cattle foreman to one side and gave him instructions. The first market herd would start the following day on the drive to Red River, the railroad shipping point. There were shipping points nearer, but in order to reach them the cattle would have to cross the plains, a semi-arid region, and would lose in weight. A route was therefore chosen through the southern part of the mountains where grass and water were plentiful. The cattle were to be driven slowly and grazed on the way, so that they would fatten instead of lose weight. The last two days of the drive, on the far side of the mountains, would be in an irrigated farming country, where alfalfa hay would be purchased for the cattle until they were on board the cars. But he—Ortega—would be there to attend to the shipping. He could reach the railroad in a day, and, besides, he had important business in the capital.

At the mess table that noon Ortega made a speech. He told the men of the wonderful things he would do for his people when he became Senator. His life would be spent working for their interests. He would have laws passed that would make life easier for them. He talked of the great issues of the day,—tariff on wool, States' rights, and many other things of which his audience had no comprehension whatever,—no more nor less than most of the common working people the world over. He made it clear, however, that everything they had to buy would be cheaper and everything they had to sell—labor or commodities—would bring a better price. There would be less work and more play if he were elected and the laws which he favored passed. And, he added, not only must he be elected to the Senate, but his whole party must be placed in power.

Next, he pictured the calamities that would inevitably befall them if the opposition should be elected; nor did he forget to mention the National Forests, which he por-

trayed as the very worst of all evils that had befallen his people. With the most bitter and scathing phrases he denounced the policies of the Forest Service. He cited Thorne and Casper as examples of its disciples. He pictured the ruin of the range cattle and sheep industry, which furnished the livelihood of his people.

The timber, the grass on the public range, as much as the air they breathed and the water they drank, were the heritage of his people, passed down from generations now dead, and the Government at Washington had no right to claim them nor to regulate their use. Each State should take care of its people and its own public lands and resources. Each community should do the same. The hordes of white men from the East had no right to overrun the West. They had had their heritage and had wasted it in riotous living, and now sought to regain their lost station by grabbing the lands remaining in the West.

This great wrong he would fight, and his party would fight, and he expected the undivided support of his people in his struggle for them. Their opportunity would be at the polls on election day.

True, he intended to fight these usurpers, personally, in the courts. He did not intend to allow any petty forest rangers to run his business for him or for his people. In all of this he knew that he could count on the faithful support of all of his beloved people.

The cheering over, the great man drove on at the same breakneck speed, while Cady constantly exhibited his skill in handling the tandem of four spirited young horses, as they fairly flew over the rough roads, which were simply two deeply worn parallel trails. The grass grew on the comb or center of the road the same as on the sides, and here and there this comb was so high that the axle scraped.

Winding back and forth, following the lines of least resistance,—the course of a stream, or the contour of the foothills, through valleys, down the banks of deep arroyos

and out again,—ran the endless trail, ever changing, yet monotonous.

The nerve of a white man was one of the qualifications necessary to drive at the pace Ortega wished to travel; Cady had this in full measure, hence Ortega employed him. He knew how to use others more competent than himself to accomplish his purposes.

They stopped at the homes and camps of the smaller cattle owners in that vicinity. They too had previously been instructed to have their cattle rounded up on that day.

At each place he reviewed the cattle as he had at his own camp. His bookkeeper in the store had given him a list that morning of all these small owners whom he would see on that day's drive, and a statement of their indebtedness at the store, the number of cattle they should have, and the amount of the mortgage Ortega had on them. He bought the cattle which he considered should go to market, and all the above factors, and others, were considered in making his decision. He made a note of the transaction to be handed to his bookkeeper that night, and instructed the small owner to drive the cattle that he had bought to join the big herd, which would start on the trail to Red River in the morning.

Wherever there was a crowd assembled, he made a short political speech; but he could not waste much time in this manner. His election was assured. The people dared not oppose him, and most of them believed him to be perfection personified, worshiping the very ground upon which he trod.

One small cattle owner incurred his disfavor. His bill was too large at the store. He had not cared for the "calf crop" as he should, and his losses had been quite heavy. Ortega mistrusted his loyalty. Flying into a rage, he reprimanded him mercilessly, taking all his cattle to apply on the account, and commanding him to report to his foreman for a job when he had delivered the cattle. He could work as a common cow puncher until he had

paid the debt in full, or go to prison. In short, by one word from Ortega he was made a common peon for the remainder of his days.

Cady incessantly cut the leaders with the long lash of his whip, and toward evening they showed unmistakable signs of exhaustion. Finally, just at dusk they pulled up at the office, and Ortega stepped out. After supper he would go over the day's work with his bookkeeper and look up his schedule for the morrow's work. To-morrow he would drive to another locality and get the cattle from that section started for the market. Perhaps his sheep camps would command his attention the next day.

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Each morning, as the sun slyly peeked over the horizon, Hardy and Berger rode out from camp. All day long they rode new trails and explored new territory, learning the lay of the land, and witnessing the activities of the people. As the sun sank behind the desert in the evening they returned.

Each evening, as they sat in the light of the camp fire, they discussed the experiences of the day. Then Hardy told tales of his adventures in other lands, and on the sea. Berger wrote letters, dreamed dreams, and thought thoughts which he did not put into words.

Occasionally on their rides they met the Mayor Domo and Cady, but neither stopped to make acquaintances; civil salutations, the custom of the range country, were exchanged, but nothing more. In fact, they made no effort to become acquainted with anyone, simply riding on as though they were on business of their own, which fully occupied their time and thoughts.

Sometimes they would stop and ask a Mexican the name of a cañon, creek, or village. At Hardy's suggestion Berger was taking down all these names, and before they had ridden many days he had begun the draft of a rough map of the district. Each day they learned something new, and another note was made or a new line added.

Not more than a week had passed in this way before

they noted that there was unusual activity among the cattle men and cowboys,—the fall roundup had begun. Then they rode harder than ever, watching the movement of the range stock. They made it a point to visit each locality when the work was just about completed, noted the brands on the cattle, estimated the numbers, and at times even rode up boldly and asked the foreman or owner a few questions. The Mexicans were not always inclined to reply directly; but, when Hardy drew a pace nearer and looked them squarely in the eye with a seriousness of expression that plainly said “no fooling now”, the answer would be forthcoming.

At the sheep camps the lambs were being cut out and the market flocks started on their way to the railroad the same as the cattle.

Our rangers soon found plenty to occupy their attention. They truly had business to attend to and could waste no time in idle conversation or amusements. All this was interesting, exciting to Berger. To Hardy it was the old routine of the work, simply the line of duty.

One Saturday they received a letter from the Forest Supervisor. This Hardy read before they left the post-office, and as they rode out through the big gate of the placeta, he remarked: “Old Mack wants us to get acquainted with Ranger Brewster as soon as we can conveniently. He says Brewster may be able to give us some information about the west line of this district.” There was no further conversation, as Berger was too absorbed in his own letters to ask his usual list of questions at that time.

That night they sat up late reading the mail. Berger had a letter from his sweetheart—Elaine—as usual, one from his mother, and several from friends and school-mates. They had also received a newspaper, which interested Hardy, and the evening grew into night before they thought of sleep.

Sundays they did not ride, so they lay in bed an hour longer than usual the next morning. While they were

washing the breakfast dishes, Berger suddenly turned to Hardy and asked: "Who is this Ranger Brewster that the Supervisor wants us to see?"

"He's the ranger in charge of the next district on the mountains over there. Know'd of him a long time, but never did meet up with him. Reckon he can give us some pointers all right. He's been in this 'neck o' the woods' since 'Heck' was a pup."

"Why, I thought there were no white men over here, except Cady and that farmer we saw the other day. Brewster is a white man, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's his color all right. But I'll eat my words about his livin' near here. He lives over on the Rio de las Bacas, maybe sixty miles from here, in the valley on the other side of the first range."

"Is it a white man's country over there?"

"Well,—don't know much about it. Never been there, kid. But I reckon it must be just about the edge o' the white man's country. From there over the other way to the railroad, I reckon it is pretty well settled by a civilized folk. The Mexicans ain't a mountain people. Don't reckon there's many of 'em up that high, but Brewster's probably our closest white neighbor out that way."

"I suppose that country has been a National Forest for years, has it not?"

"Now, kid! You missed your calling. You ought to be a lawyer or a prosecutin' attorney. You're leadin' me into tellin' a pack o' lies by your infernal cross questionin'. Git out that proclamation map and look up the Rio de las Bacas, and get some reliable information."

Berger colored a little, evidently taking Hardy's comments as a rebuke. Hardy noticed this and added, "Now don't take life too damned serious, kid. You've got to discount my words. I'm awful glad to see you interested enough to ask a few questions. But dog-gone it! I'm no walkin' encyclopedia. The map will give you a whole lot more reliable information. And by the way, I've never mentioned it before, but Old Mack counts on

you to produce a map o' this district by the time we ride it six months. He knew'd I was mighty lame at that kind o' work and told me that you'd probably be pretty handy at it,—writin' letters and reports. So now I've given you the tip, kid; that's your chance to make a hit with Old Mack."

Berger studied the map with a new interest and remarked: "Why, this map shows the country east of the Rio de las Bacas to be quite thickly settled,—several post-offices, a couple of big saw mills, some smaller ones, and a smelter. Somebody has marked these places on the map in ink. The whole east side of the mountain is well mapped out, but there is not a thing shown on this side."

"As I said before, that's your job, kid. But, say! it's Sunday. Uncle Sam don't expect us to bother our heads with such things to-day, even if we are on duty."

"He wouldn't object, though, to our washing a few of our dirty clothes, would he?"

"Cleanliness is next to godliness! Just as well break in that little tub and washboard you bought. Build a fire over near the creek there, where the water will be handy. We'll give 'em a good boilin' first. It's a wonder you didn't get a flatiron and ironin' board. I'm not exactly used to these modern conveniences you are introducin' into our camp life,—but I'm not too old or stubborn to learn a new trick. I generally just rub 'em out on a rough stone in the creek an' hang 'em on a limb to dry."

"While the water is heating, we will shave, eh, old man?"

Berger was beginning to leave off formalities and occasionally went so far as to give Hardy a pet name. Hardy did not resent this as he had the "Mister". They were getting to be "pals".

In the afternoon they bathed in the stream. The mountain water was ice cold, but to these men it was invigorating. That evening they had time to catch some trout for supper, and Hardy baked bread enough for another week. With all the usual chores attended to and

Buck picketed near by, camp life was beginning to take on a kind of routine, and did not seem quite so much like a picnic to Berger as it had at first. It was coming to be like "Don't forget to wind the clock and put out the cat, John."

Hardy lay with his upturned saddle adjusted under his shoulders and his pipe burning to his satisfaction. Berger sat waiting to hear another yarn. But to-night Hardy's thoughts seemed to be far away, and they sat in silence for a long time. It would not be hard to guess where Berger's thoughts had strayed to, but we shall not try to guess Hardy's. When he was in this mood, there was no use trying to interest him in conversation. Berger had learned this.

Finally Hardy seemed to "come to" with a start. Then, slowly knocking the ashes from his pipe and refilling it, he remarked: "We won't ride quite as hard after this roundup is over. It won't do to get the hosses thin an' out o' condition just as winter is comin' on. Reckon I'd better go up and get one o' yours and picket near camp for the night. They've had a rest and might stray away if they're all left together. Which one shall I bring in?"

"I will go and get one."

"No; you sit by the fire and write your letters, kid. Which one shall I get?"

"Well, if you won't let me go, bring in Pinto,—you seem to want to do all the work on holidays."

Hardy was gone an unusually long time, and, when he did return, he had no horses with him. Answering Berger's inquiring look, he said: "I went up the creek at least three miles, and there ain't a hoss to be seen. I might've missed 'em, but it's so moonlight I hardly reckon so."

"They have been straying away farther every day," thoughtfully remarked Berger. "I found them up four or five miles yesterday morning."

"Well, we can't very well search for 'em to-night, so let's go to bed and start out early in the morning."

Just at dawn Berger saddled old Buck, which happened to be the horse picketed close by their camp, and rode up the cañon in search of the other horses. Hardy prepared breakfast as usual, but, when Berger did not return, he finally ate alone. Waiting began to excite his fears.

Noon came and still no Berger. Hardy could stay inactive no longer. He had no horse to ride. He hated walking as badly as any cowboy ever did, but there was no choice this time. So he buckled on his cartridge belt and six shooter, filled his pockets with jerky, a couple of pieces of bread, a few raisins and a fresh plug of tobacco, and started out. He had no definite plans. He was simply going, prepared for anything that might happen. Then, on second thought, he turned back and wrote on a page of his old notebook and stuck it in the front of Berger's tent: "Don't worry about me. I may not be back for a week.—Hardy."

After he had gone up the valley for two or three miles, he began to search for tracks, and found where the horses had been grazing, hobbling along, the day before. A little farther on and the tracks changed. They looked as though the horses were no longer hobbled. He found the rope hobbles on the ground cut with a knife. Some one had cut them off of all except one, and that one, of course, was "Cyclone". No man could catch him, even when hobbled, unless well mounted and handy with a rope.

Hardy went back to the place where the tracks first indicated that the horses were foot free, and looked for man tracks. Sure enough, there they were,—moccasin tracks. He quickly traced them to a clump of bushes where a mule had been tied.

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That night there was no one at the rangers' camp. Just at dusk the following day Berger rode in with the whole string of horses. He read Hardy's note, and wondered where he could be. Then, picketing four of the horses near camp and hobbling the other two, he said to himself: "I will just reverse the order, and take no chances of losing these horses again, until Hardy gets back anyway."

He was too tired to prepare supper and too hungry to sleep without something to eat, so he ate some jerky and bread, and then went to bed. As tired as he was, he could not sleep soundly. Every now and then he would arouse with a start and look out to make sure the horses were still there.

In the morning he prepared a simple breakfast and ate absent-mindedly. Then, cutting new ropes, he hobbled all the horses but one. This one he saddled and rode up to a point on the ridge overlooking the whole valley and watched the horses and camp. He could not imagine where Hardy was, but he reasoned that it would be better to stay near camp and take care of their possessions than to try to search for him in that wilderness. He was afraid that Hardy might have met with foul play, and, remembering how poorly he had slept the night before, he decided to spend the next night up on the ridge, if Hardy did not come. At the same time he was afraid the camp might be raided in the night, and it occurred to him that he would be an easy target, sitting alone in the light of the camp fire.

To-morrow he would go and search for Hardy, nor would he quit until he had been over every road and interrogated every native in that whole region. He would learn what they knew if he had to secure their reply at the point of his gun. He was fast arriving at a desperate frame of mind—something must be done.

While all these things passed through Berger's mind, his eyes continually scanned the landscape. From the point of vantage which he had chosen, he could see al-

most every foot of the little valley below. About mid-afternoon he thought he spied something moving along the trail that led in from the north.

Yes, there was something coming slowly towards him. He watched closely, and as it drew nearer he began to make out the objects. There was a man mounted; but what was that going before him? A little nearer and Berger could see plainly. The object in the lead was a man walking, and the other was Hardy mounted on a mule. Of all things! What could this mean?

He watched them as they came slowly along until they reached the main trail a short distance above the camp. Then Hardy dismounted, and Berger could see by his gestures that he was talking to his companion, a Mexican. He turned and pointed toward the flag at the camp, and then spoke earnestly again to the Mexican. Finally he handed him the bridle reins. The Mexican lost no time in mounting the mule and starting back along the trail over which he and Hardy had just come.

Hardy stood and watched him until he disappeared over the ridge, and Berger thought he could see him laugh. Something in his attitude or gesture told Berger that he was standing there chuckling as he did when especially pleased. Then Hardy walked slowly along the trail toward camp, and Berger hurried down to meet him.

He dismounted and looked Hardy in the face, expressing more plainly than words could have done the joy at his return; but before he could begin his usual, and in this case very natural, string of questions, Hardy stretched out his hand to shake, and a broad grin covered his face, as he remarked in his old time drawl: "I see you got the hosses, kid."

They sat down in the shade. Hardy filled his pipe, taking more time than usual, it seemed to Berger, who could hardly wait to ply him with questions. Finally he could wait no longer and began by saying: "Tell me all about it, Hardy."

"There isn't much to tell, kid. After you left I found

the track o' the dirty, low-down brute of a greaser who took the hobbles off them hosses, and tracked 'im to his camp, beat hell out o' him, and come back just as soon as I could."

"But what's that cut on your arm?"

"Oh, that's nothin',—just a scratch; all my own fault. Just forgot to search him for a knife when I took his gun away from him, and, when I started to punish him, he pulled out his hunting knife; but a jolt on the point of his chin jarred him loose from it, and I threw it in the creek. After that he just wilted. 'Twasn't any fun to lick 'im, he was such a damned coward."

"You must have trailed him a long ways. I don't see how you did it."

"Well, he rode a mule. Of course that's a different track from anything else on the range. But I did have one hell of a time. He was afraid we'd try to trail 'im, I reckon, for he didn't travel any regular trail for quite a ways. Took to the rim rock, and I had a time findin' where he left it. Then, when he got to that creek over there, he took to the water and went down stream for a couple o' miles. That's where I spent the first night. In the mornin' I found out where he had come out on the other side, and after that it was easy. He took to a little trail and followed it straight to Ortega's big sheep camp, over in the Trujillo country. I came onto 'em there the next night. He was settin' by the camp fire tellin' a couple o' his herders all about it,—what a fine joke he'd played on the Gringo rangers.

"I got up close enough to catch part o' his conversation. 'Course I don't 'sabe' a lot o' that Mexican lingo; but I caught enough to learn that he'd been sent by Ortega to do the trick. He seemed to think Ortega would be greatly pleased when he reported what complete success he'd had.

"That made me most awful mad and right there was when I decided to teach 'im better. Ortega's the man who'd ought to be licked, but I just figured this way:

if he has to use a third party to get at us, it's only fair to do the same by him. Guess Old Ortega is gettin' a little nervous. Maybe he don't like the idea of us ridin' at his round-ups and asking so many fool questions."

"What did you do with the other men while you were whipping him?"

"If I'm not careful, you'll get me tangled with your cross questions, kid, but I'll tell you. I simply waited till they'd gone out with the sheep the next mornin' before I introduced myself. I figured they were innocent parties, and no witnesses were needed."

"And then you made him walk all the way back, while you rode his mule? Aren't you afraid he will come back and do us more harm? Maybe bring others with him and shoot us from the darkness as we sit around the camp fire? Looks to me as if we might be getting into serious trouble."

Hardy looked at Berger as if to size him up before he answered. He could see that Berger was really alarmed, but there was no trace in the expression of his face to indicate a "yellow streak" in his nature. He was no "quitter". Hardy was satisfied of that. Berger's questions after all were only natural ones, and entitled to a civil answer.

"I don't reckon we'll be in any more danger than we've been in all along, maybe not as much. The only reason they've not popped us off before is the fact that the Stars and Stripes float above our camp."

"Why, do you believe they have any respect for the flag or understand what it means?"

"Respect? No. But understanding? Yes. Many of the older men fought in the Mexican War and the lesson old General Taylor learned 'em stayed with 'em. They understand that it is not a good policy to interfere with the American flag and 'Americano' boys who protect it. I throwed a scare into him, an' he's feelin' mighty happy that he got off so easy. For my part I don't have the least fear of 'em returnin' to 'get even'."

"I suppose," said Berger, "that explains why our camp has not been molested before. I worried some the first few days we rode away and left everything we had here unprotected. But I was wrong. It was not unprotected. The Stars and Stripes were waving over it. Maybe that 'U. S. Property' notice you put up helped some too."

"Not a bit. No one ever came near enough to read it. I looked for tracks every night when we came in. I don't suppose one in ten o' those greasers could read it anyway, even if it had been in Spanish. But don't ever doubt for a minute but that they have a good wholesome fear o' what that flag represents.

"They're just naturally afraid o' a white man anyway. It's the nature o' the breed. They're an inferior race. It's the same the world over—I've seen 'em all,—black, yellow, brown, red, any old color; they're all afraid o' a white man. But say, kid, I think it's about time for you to answer a few o' my questions. Where did you find those hosses? And how did you get back so quick?"

"I found their tracks as you did and followed them. It wasn't hard to do, for they followed the main trail straight over the mountains. It joins the trail we came over on about fifteen miles this side of Mr. Hamilton's place. If we had known where we were going to camp, we could have come that way and saved several miles of travel. Mr. Hamilton happened to see the horses coming up the trail, and he and his boys turned them into his pasture there by the house.

"Cyclone's ankles are terribly sore. Those rope hobbles wore right through the skin, cutting clear into the tendons of his pasterns. But I don't suppose he would have stayed behind if they had cut his ankles in two. The hobbles wore in two first. I found them in the trail about halfway over in the second big park.

"Say, man! There sure are some grouse up there in that fallen timber, where the forest fires burned over a few years ago. I shot half a dozen going over, and Mrs. Hamilton fried them for supper. You know, I left camp

here before breakfast, and my appetite was surely good. I believe that was the best supper I ever ate. She had light bread, real cow's milk, and butter. Of course she is a Mexican, and I couldn't class her cooking with mother's. She had the regulation pot of frijoles and chili, and some things were none too clean; but I wasn't so particular as to let that interfere with my appetite. I surely did enjoy those grouse.

"I couldn't shoot any coming back, for fear of scaring old Cyclone and maybe stampeding the whole bunch. I had him tied in the middle. I led Pinto, tied Cyclone to his tail, and Shorty to Cyclone's. Buck and Dan followed. I knew they wouldn't leave the others, so I just turned them loose. Old Buck is the best horse I believe I have ever ridden over a mountain trail. He never made a misstep and seemed just as strong under me the last mile as the first. Mr. Hamilton said I must have ridden him sixty miles. It was just dusk when I reached there. I knew, though, that I was gaining on them. Every little while in the afternoon Buck would put his nose down on the trail, then raise his head high, and with ears pointed forward, whinny hard and long, and try to start out on a run. I held him down, but we made good time."

"You had a hard ride, kid, but you got off lucky. I reckoned you'd have to follow 'em clear back to your home, and maybe wouldn't be back till Thanksgiving."

Berger did not say that while he followed the trail of the horses over the mountains it had also occurred to him that they might have gone all the way home, and that it had not been an altogether unpleasant thought. But it was when he saw the horses in Hamilton's pasture that a feeling of disappointment and homesickness had come over him. He would not have the opportunity to go home this time. Then he had thought of Hardy back there in camp, and the path of duty was again plain. He must take the horses back and stay with the job.

"Thanksgiving?" said Berger. "That reminds me. Do you know, there is a big brood of wild turkey in the

very head of this cañon? Let's try to get one for Thanksgiving."

"So you've some hopes of bein' on earth and livin' long enough to enjoy a turkey dinner Thanksgiving, have you?"

"Well, what you said about the Stars and Stripes has convinced me that we are pretty well protected after all. At any rate, I will say again what I know you practice, 'Let's not borrow trouble from to-morrow'."

"That's the stuff, Berger. We'll have trouble enough when it comes. Now to-morrow we'll shoe the hosses. Old Buck's shoes are about worn out. Those shoes I bought the other day will fit 'im, an' the others we'll just reset. Baldie has new shoes now. It will give 'em a rest. Then the next day we'll saddle up and ride out just as if nothin' had happened. We've just lost a couple o' days in gettin' acquainted with these dirty greasers, but what's our loss may be their gain. No doubt, they're somewhat better acquainted *with us*. Maybe I hadn't ought to've licked that poor ignorant cuss; but what else could I do?"

"Mr. Hamilton said he was surprised to see me alive. He said a white man didn't usually last so long over in this country."

Here Hardy interrupted. "Don't start in to-night to tell me all the tales the old nester had ready for you. Some real rainy Sunday I'll listen to 'em. But just now I need some sleep. It was a little too chilly to sleep real sound without a blanket the last two nights."

CHAPTER VII

AN EVENTFUL DAY

The day was perfect, the kind that makes the golden autumns of the Southwest. The past month had been an unbroken succession of perfect days. True, there had been a white frost nearly every morning, and the air had been cool enough to bring forth a little shiver,—simply Nature's way of toning the system for winter's coming; but in midday the temperature would be just right without a coat.

Long before the chill of morn had been driven away by the rays of the rising sun, every human being throughout the whole countryside—mountain or foothill, valley or plain—was up and doing, hurrying about in nervous haste, saddling horses, packing burros, mules, and horses, loading wagons with camp outfits and provisions. Everyone,—women, children, old men,—all were preparing to go somewhere.

Why all this excitement? Were the people about to flee? Had couriers brought news of the advancement of an enemy in overwhelming numbers?

As the morning advanced into the day, every road, every trail, every footpath had its procession, stringing out for miles and miles. From all directions they were advancing, double quick, toward a common center,—the main placeta,—the home of the Mayor Domo, their acknowledged leader and protector.

Some had started the day before, camped on the way overnight, and were now hurrying, evidently bent on reaching there ahead of the throng. Was a small army being mobilized in that thinly settled region? Were the women and children, the old, the feeble, to take refuge within the safety of the high walls of the placeta, while

the brave young men advanced to meet the foe? What had so stirred the sluggish blood of these people?

About the placeta all was excitement. On all sides save one tents were going up, camp fires built, and horses, mules, and burros picketed, hobbled, or herded in small bands. Before noon an encampment surrounded the village on three sides.

The women were busily engaged preparing the midday meal over the camp fires, while the men went to and fro, in and out, through the big gate, all bent on important errands.

On the side of the placeta where no encampments had been made, a long straight track had been cleared. Over this riders were running horses back and forth. Occasionally new horses would be brought in from the nearby bands, and the others taken back. At one end of the track were three men, one of whom had a large notebook, in which he made entries from time to time after consultation with the other two. Quite a crowd of men and boys had assembled and were taking great interest in these proceedings. Perhaps they were choosing horses most suitable for service in the coming conflict.

Crowds of men were congregated about the placeta, talking excitedly in groups, and going in and out of the cantina and "la tienda" (the store). Directly in front of the Mayor Domo's office window a long line of men had formed.

Within the office very strange and unusual proceedings were taking place. The usual furnishings had been moved back, and in the middle of the room was set a long table. The door was securely bolted so no one could intrude. Near the window at the end of the table stood a young man on guard, watching the line of men forming outside. A broken pane of glass enabled him to communicate with them.

Lying open in the center of the table was a large book, on the pages of which were listed the names of all of the men of the community. On one end of the table was a

huge stack of folded papers, and on the other end a strong box. First one and then another of the men would scan the pages of the big book. Very few words were exchanged.

Each man, as he came up in turn, gave his name, and after careful consideration by the serious-minded men within and due perusal of the book, one of the folded papers was handed out through the broken pane to him. He dumbly made his cross in the indicated space upon the paper with a pencil which dangled at the end of a string from the window casing, and passed the paper back through the window, and it was deposited in the box through a slit. His name was checked off in the big book, another took his place at the window, and the performance was repeated.

As each man left the window, he went straight into the store. The bookkeeper was very busy indeed looking up each man's account and paying him cash in full for all his credits, and even advancing small sums of money to many who had no actual credits, but were deserving of financial assistance at this time.

The clerks in the store were, of course, busily engaged in taking part of the money back in exchange for commodities. The larger part of this money, however, was destined to be spent for other purposes. The cantinas were doing a rushing business, and there were also many unusual ways in which money could be expended that day.

At the rangers' camp, also, there was unusual activity on this particular morning. Very little time was wasted on the morning meal. Berger had caught all of the horses; he had had to run down old Cyclone, and, after roping him, brought him to camp with the others. Hardy was busily engaged packing their belongings in form for travel.

What could all this mean?

Simply that it was "Election Day". There would be a "fiesta" (feast), chicken pull, horseraces, and other sports; and in the evening a big free-for-all "baile"

(dance). Berger was all excitement in anticipation of the last event, while Hardy could think of nothing but the horseraces. He must be on the grounds early and see the horses train, and, if possible, he would enter Cyclone in a race.

They had made their plans the night before. Berger wanted to stay for the dance in the evening, and it had been decided that they would take the horses and camp outfit, and that the following day they would ride on over to Ranger Brewster's place. The round-up was over, and the next week they would start running out that west line. They would go over there, camp, and attend to that work before they returned. Perhaps they would meet Brewster at the election.

As they approached the placeta, they could see that the people were already assembling in considerable numbers. There seemed to be hundreds of dogs. And, yes! They were already trying out the horses, getting them accustomed to the track.

They chose a suitable place and pitched their tents, placing all their provisions inside and securely fastening the slit in the tent so that no dogs could enter. Then, draping the flag around one tent, they hobbled three of the horses and tied old Cyclone to a tree. It would be better for him to have nothing to eat if he was to be in any of the races. His wind would be better.

Mounting their horses, they rode over to the track, casually observing the race horses train for a while, then they rode through the big gate into the placeta.

The Mayor Domo was seemingly everywhere present. The rangers had no sooner entered the gate than he spied them, and motioned everyone to make way so they could advance. He invited them to dismount, introducing himself, and stating that, when he had had the opportunity of meeting them before, pressing business matters had deprived him of the pleasure of making their acquaintance. He extended a cordial invitation to them to join the

sports and amusements of the day and to make themselves at home.

The people who witnessed the warm reception that Ortega extended to the rangers saw nothing inconsistent in it. They all knew that Ortega had nothing but hatred in his heart for the "Gringos", and especially for these guards of the forests. They knew also that Ortega had his own reasons for his actions; and no one dared criticise or even question his wisdom and motives. Then, too, it was a holiday. All enmity must be thrown aside, and hospitality extended to all comers,—at least until the fiesta was over.

Hardy recognized this as his opportunity to have Cyclone entered in the races, and accordingly he broached the subject. Ortega heartily acquiesced without a moment's hesitation. Most assuredly he could enter a horse in the races—the more the merrier. It was to be a day of sports.

A messenger was immediately despatched with a verbal message to the committee in charge of the races to allow the rangers to enter a horse in any race which they chose. Hardy and Berger accompanied the messenger to the track, and in a very few moments Cyclone's name had been duly listed in the entry book.

There was to be a mile race open to all comers on payment of the entrance fee of "un peso" (one dollar), "sweepstakes to the winner", and in addition a very fine silver mounted saddle which the Mayor Domo had himself offered as an extra prize. This would, perhaps, be the most exciting event of the day. It would certainly be so for Hardy.

It was already past midday. The line of waiting men outside the window had dwindled to a straggler now and then; the voting was nearly completed. The fact that no man could cash his credits at the store until he had cast his ballot had made quick work of the voting.

The fiesta—the first big event of the day—was about to take place. Two fat beeves and a half dozen mutton

had been barbecued. These were being cut up and distributed among the people. Hardy and Berger received very liberal portions by special courier, just as they were making coffee and preparing dinner over their camp fire. Everywhere, everyone was feasting. All had money to buy whatever was needed in the line of eatables—an unusual occurrence—and a bottle or two of beer besides. It was truly a feast.

As they sat down to eat, Berger remarked: "I didn't know there were so many Mexicans this side of the Rio Grande. It's hard to believe that we are in the United States. It would be much easier to imagine that we are in Chihuahua."

Hardy took a big bite of roast mutton, chewed for a while, and then drawled: "There ain't an awful lot of 'em. I don't believe there's over a thousand of 'em all told, not countin' the dogs."

"No, perhaps there aren't. But certainly there are not many more in the surrounding country within fifty miles, at least."

"Just a few sheep herders is all; and I reckon Ortega will send others out to take their places so they can come in to vote before night. We'll see 'em all to-day, kid."

"Have you seen our friend who rode the mule, and specializes on cutting hobbles?"

"Oh, yes! He's that dirty lookin' devil that was cuttin' up those barbecued sheep, and passin' 'em around. If you'll take real close observation, you'll see that left eye o' his'n has a little streak around it yet that is even a little darker than the rest o' his dirty hide."

"Why! he is a powerful looking fellow. He is half again larger than you."

"No, he ain't! Me and him are both damned awful certain of that."

Berger could hardly contain himself for laughter at this remark. "Well, to change the subject, Hardy, what are you going to do with that silver mounted saddle? You can't ride two."

"I'm not so doggoned certain that I will get that saddle, kid. Old Ortega has got a most awful strong frameup on that race. He don't intend that saddle to get out o' the family, and he also expects to get a few pesos,—whatever the sweepstakes are—besides. I reckon you noticed that white faced sorrel the little cross-eyed kid was exercisin' when we first came in this mornin'. Well! He was down at Ortega's cow camp on the Blanco a couple o' weeks ago. He belongs to Old Ortega's nephew. Old Ortega has just imported that hoss from somewhere. He's not from any strain o' hosses raised in this neck o' the woods. He's got all the points o' a first-class mile hoss.

"Ortega don't think he's takin' any chance o' losin' that saddle. Probably bought it for the kid, and put it up as a prize just to advertise his generosity, and incidentally get a few extra pesos, as I said before. Old Cyclone will make 'im run for it, though. He's some hoss hisself. But hell! He's in no shape to run,—hasn't been on a track for two years. Can't enter the old fool in any civilized race—just runs hog wild. No man can keep 'im on a circular track."

The races were called for three o'clock, the chicken pull at five, and after that the all-night dance. First there were a few foot races, then some quarter and half mile horse races.

In order to help along the amusement and excitement of these events, Berger and Hardy picked their favorite runner or horse, as the case might be, and backed their judgment by a dollar bet with each other. Berger came out winner on the foot races and Hardy on the horse races. Hardy did not dare to bring old Cyclone near the track until it came time for his race, for fear he would become unmanageable. Neither did the white faced sorrel enter any of the preliminary races.

The time for the big race was drawing near. Berger had gone for Cyclone while Hardy was watching the lineup of the horses that were being entered for the race.

There were eight so far. Then the white faced sorrel appeared. After that no one seemed to care to risk a dollar, even though the prize was great. There were no second or third prizes, the best horse taking the stakes, prize and all.

Just at this point a white man rode up to where Hardy was standing. He was mounted on a large bay saddle animal; the saddle, bits, and spurs were silver mounted. From the "Big Four 'Stetson'" with braided hair hat band to the tips of his "Hier" made boots, this man was clad in the best and fanciest of Western range paraphernalia. All this was taken in at a glance, but what instantly identified the man to Hardy was the little bronze badge—U.S. and the pine tree—pinned on the front of his woolen shirt.

"This must be Brewster?"

"Yes. And this Hardy?"

"Right! You have come just in time for the final race."

Just then Berger came up leading Cyclone. Hardy had barely time to speak their names in introduction, and mounting Cyclone barebacked, the same as the others, was in the line waiting for the pistol shot, Berger hanging to the bridle rein on one side and Brewster on the other of old Cyclone, who was surely going crazy.

Would they never fire that shot? After what seemed to Hardy ages, the pistol was fired. They were off!

Off! Old Cyclone seemed to fairly shoot into the air, and came down a full length ahead of the others. At the first quarter post he was rods in the lead—the first half, and old Cyclone was still holding the lead with no sign of slackening.

Then it became noticeable that the white faced sorrel was gaining. At the third quarter Cyclone was only a couple of lengths in the lead—all the others were now too far behind to be considered. The middle of the last quarter, and they were almost neck and neck—the white faced sorrel was steadily gaining ground—he was a long

distance horse. Old Cyclone had made his spurt and was about to give out.

The Mexicans were cheering, throwing their hats in the air, wild with excitement. With less than a sixteenth to go, the white faced sorrel was a full length ahead. The race was over—almost.

Suddenly Hardy leaned forward, pulled out his old forty-five, and fired it close to Cyclone's ears. Again old Cyclone seemed to leave the earth, and this time he did not come down, but just flew; and as he passed the mile-post he was a full length ahead of the sorrel.

But he did not stop! He surely had "gone crazy"! On through the sage he flew till his foot found a prairie dog hole, and down he went. Then it was Hardy's turn to leave all earthly things and take aerial flight. The ascent and descent were accomplished admirably well, but the landing was simply a succession of cartwheels overtaking each other in riotous confusion, and finally all tumbled together in total collapse.

As soon as Berger had let go of Cyclone's bridle rein, he mounted his horse and followed the racers down the track, and at the finish was where he could see what happened.

Old Cyclone had recovered his feet in an instant and was racing on, as madly as ever; but Hardy did not get up. Berger hurriedly rode to where he had fallen. Hardy was lying limp on the ground. Berger rolled him over; his pulse was beating, but he was unconscious. He surely had taken flight from all earthly things for the time being. Taking the water bag from the saddle horn, he poured water on his face.

Tom Cady, who was field marshall of the day, rode up just as Hardy opened his eyes.

Brewster had stayed near the starting point, merely remounting, so as to be in a better position to observe what was going on and to take such action as might occur to him to be appropriate or necessary. The prize saddle had been hung by a buckskin thong before the

eyes of the eager contestants at the starting place and dangled from the branch of a nearby tree. Soon he noticed that several men had surrounded the saddle. They were taking it down! Would they take the opportunity offered by the confusion to spirit the saddle into the crowd and disappear with it? He knew that Hardy must have won the race, or the cheering would not have stopped so suddenly. That was Hardy's saddle.

One instant was enough to debate the question in his mind, and his decision was made. He rode straight into the crowd. The big bay needed no one to clear the way for him. Everyone gave way as he advanced toward the place where the saddle had disappeared. As he rode up, the men who were carrying the saddle dropped it; and, as they turned, he asked in true Mexican lingo, "Señores, porque?" (Gentlemen, why do you do this?)

There was a moment's hesitation. Then one, quicker witted than the others, replied: "Mister, we are just going to carry it to the other end of the track and present it to the winner of the race."

"Good! my friends," Brewster sarcastically replied. "As I am mounted on a strong horse, I will carry the saddle for you, and we will go together and present it to the winner."

Without waiting for a reply he reached down, picked up the saddle by the horn, and, hanging it from the horn of his own saddle by the buckskin thong, led the procession slowly to the other end of the track. The procession, however, dispersed in all directions, and, when Brewster reached the other end of the track, he had no followers.

By this time Hardy had been carried to his tent by Berger and Cady. Cady had left the rangers' camp, however, before Brewster rode up with the saddle, and was back keeping order in the crowd. He would be fully occupied the remainder of the day and until the next day, —the "*mañana*." The festivities of the day and the free use of popular beverages, including mezcal, had begun to show their effects.

So when Brewster rode up with the saddle a few minutes later, he merely stated that it had been intrusted to him for safe delivery to the winner, together with the compliments of the other contestants, the judges, and in fact the whole assemblage, including himself.

Fortunately, Hardy had no broken bones, but he said he felt exactly like a jellyfish. Having been a sailor, no doubt he knew. He was in no condition to attend the chicken pull, but insisted that Berger and Brewster should not miss it on his account. He would be all right alone in camp, and perhaps he would go and watch the dance a little while in the evening.

Berger answered evasively that he had seen so many chicken pulls that they were disgusting to him, and he didn't care to witness another if he could avoid it. He would stay with Hardy in camp.

Following the fiesta, and after the dishes and cooking utensils had been washed and stowed away, the women retired to the improvised boudoirs in their tents, and spent more time than a Paris belle in perfecting their toilets. What takes place within the boudoir of a lady is not for man to attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that the transformation is very great indeed.

By the time the chicken pull was well under way, the ladies began coming out of their tents, powdered, painted, and adorned with all the finery at their command. The brightest colors of the rainbow had been unstintingly employed in their dress; and, as they mingled with the crowd, the bright colors and dazzling black eyes were all Brewster could see. Some of the señoritas were most certainly good for man to look upon! The dance would soon be on.

Brewster bought half a dozen bottles of beer and one of whisky in a cantina, not knowing which Hardy and Berger would prefer, and brought them back to camp. Hardy took a small drink of whisky, and said he would drink a little beer with his supper. Berger, however, did not touch either.

While they were eating supper, Brewster briefly de-

scribed the chicken pull to Hardy and Berger: "They buried a half dozen chickens in the sand, leaving their heads and part of their necks sticking out. The chickens—or rather old hens—were spaced about a rod apart. Then a dozen of the greasy little devils rode up the road about a quarter of a mile, and, as they ran their ponies back past this row of chickens, each tried to reach down and grab one out of the sand. It's just a kind of rough-riding stunt. There was a spill once in a while."

Brewster stopped talking and took a sip of beer. Berger finished the description for him, just to show Hardy that he hadn't lied when he said he had seen so many chicken pulls. "And, if one of them happens to pull a chicken out of the sand, the others all try to catch him and take it away from him; and he hits them over the head with it, until, before they are through, they are all blood and feathers from head to foot, and the poor chicken is torn to shreds."

Hardy drawled: "That's a true Mexican form of sport all right."

"Yes," Brewster rejoined, "right in tune with cock and bull fights," and with a sly wink at Berger, he continued, "and horseraces,—cruel to both beast and man."

Hardy was not too dull to catch the connection, but his only reply was: "That's sure some fine saddle the Mayor Domo made me a present of, eh, Brewster?"

"You know it, old man. I wouldn't mind riding that myself."

Brewster rolled the saddle over and admired its decoration. "'Frazier'", he commented. "Hand carved and silver mounted,—genuine. You know, the prize for that bloody chicken pull was a bridle to match this saddle. Didn't notice it in time or I'd rode in an' tried to win it."

There was not a building in the old placeta that was large enough to accommodate the baile, but about a mile north of the village was a building of more recent and modern construction which had been built for a warehouse for hay, wool, pelts, and supplies. This building ad-

joined a cantina, or perhaps it would be better to say that the cantina adjoined it, as the cantina was a necessary adjunct for the barter carried on for the commodities which were stored in the warehouse. Perhaps a bottle of beer was exchanged for a goatskin or one of whisky for a sack of wool.

The wool season was over, and the commodious room which the wool had occupied was empty and would remain so until the sheep were sheared again the following spring. This room served as the ballroom.

Hardy was badly bruised by his accident, though not seriously injured. Saying he did not care much about the "dirty baile", he crawled into bed, taking his six shooter and rifle.

Berger and Brewster went to the dance. It was not yet dark when they rode up. There were many saddle horses, teams, and wagons already there, and more were coming from all directions. The crowd was just assembling. As they were tying their horses, the music began, a cheer rising from the crowd. Pistols were fired into the air—the revelry had begun.

A half dozen large dry goods boxes at the far end of the room served as a platform to accommodate the orchestra, which consisted of three stringed instruments and a bass drum. Planks supported by upturned wine casks formed a bench along the wall on the remaining three sides of the room, and these were occupied by the women, who whiled away the time when not dancing in rolling cigarettes and drinking wine and beer from small bottles. Cigarettes had to be rolled for the children, too, who had not yet become proficient in the art.

The men seldom sat down. As soon as a dance was over, they straightway hurried to the cantina to get another drink and perhaps to bring back bottles of wine for the ladies of whom they would ask the favor of the next dance.

As the two white men entered the room, all eyes were turned upon them. The yelling ceased. They were attracting attention. No wonder; white men were not

common sights for these people, and these men would have attracted attention in almost any assemblage. Berger—six feet two in his stocking feet and about six feet four in his high heeled boots, broad shouldered, well proportioned though not yet mature, the overabundance of vitality and youth fairly sticking out all over him—was just a big overgrown boy whom Hardy called “Kid”, but to most who looked as he entered the dance hall, he no doubt appeared very much like a *man*.

Brewster was shorter, heavier set, red faced, chuck full of pure red blood, health, good nature—in the very prime of life. His quick glances, taking in everything in an instant, denoted a man of quick perception and action.

They were undoubtedly the best dressed men in the hall. This alone would have attracted attention, envy, admiration. Their clothing was not only of the very best quality, but of the most popular style. Brewster outshone Berger by far. His apparel, which was the best that money could buy, was ornamented with silver and gold mountings and jeweled settings.

Both wore large, broad brimmed “Stetson” hats. Red bandanas tied at opposite corners hung loosely from their necks. Olive drab woolen shirts, fancily trimmed chaparejos, six shooters in their holsters with cartridge belts, high heeled cowboy boots, and decorated spurs added to their striking appearance.

Brewster also wore leather cuffs decorated with a silver mounted turquoise set, and encircling the bandana just above the knot was a wide silver ring with setting to match,—all Navajo made.

When they entered the hall, they had removed their buckskin gloves, tucking them under their belts, the long fringed, gayly adorned gauntlets hanging over.

Soon after their arrival Brewster’s quick eye spied the pretty little señorita who had attracted his attention at the chicken pull, and it was not strange that those same dazzling, jet black eyes should be trained directly on his at the same instant. Before that instant had grown into

a half second he was in step with the music and gliding through the crowd toward her. In another infinitesimal space of time they were in the mad whirl of the dance.

Berger was somewhat embarrassed when he noticed that he was attracting so much attention. He had come with the intention of being an observer—not to be observed. Thinking he might be less conspicuous seated, he worked his way to a vacant seat on a bench and sat down. He had no intention of dancing. He knew no one, and besides they were just a bunch of Mexicans. He was merely curious to see what a genuine Mexican baile was like.

The dance was continuous. The music seldom stopped, and as one set left the floor another was forming. When a musician became tired, he handed his instrument to another, or gave his place to him. There were plenty of musicians, but there was no time to lose; the “mañana” would come too soon anyway.

The music was good for dancing. The musicians had no notes; but the harmony was perfect. The bass drum marked the time with accurate and emphatic precision. It was loud, fast, wild, weird, enchanting. It was at once exciting and fascinating to Berger to watch the gay dancers as they whirled by in perfect step with the fast music. All seemed to be expert dancers—not one made a misstep. As the dance continued, the music was played faster and faster, but still no discord.

There was something about it all that made Berger long to be on his feet and join the fantastic throng. There was no “caller”, though some of the dances were complicated—intricate—similar to the old-fashioned square dances,—lancers and Virginia reel. Only twice during the night was a waltz or schottische danced,—these dances were too tame.

Berger wondered if he could dance to such fast music. These dances were new to him. Then he thought of home—“What would his girl, Elaine, think of such society. Would he wish her to be at this dance? They were just a bunch of greasers. Pretty? Bah! If they

were among a bunch of white girls he wouldn't look at them."

A beauty in bright colors whirled by, completely diverting his line of thought. Pulling himself together with a jerk, he said aloud: "What's the matter with you, Berger? Have you been out in the solitudes too long?" Then meditating again he thought: "What would mother think if she should see me here at this ribald, drunken orgy?"

Something again distracted his attention. Was it the wild, weird incantation of that rhythmic tread?—Why?—What made the blood rush through his veins with a tingle? Again his trance was broken; the first dance was over.

Brewster led his partner to a seat at Berger's side. She surely was the belle of the ball. There were others who were attractive, but it must be admitted that Brewster's selection was excellent. In vivacity of youth and gay, ornamental dress, she was surely his match.

"Why not in the dance?—Man! You've been losing time."

"I'm enjoying watching it."

"That's part lie. An evasive answer always is. Get in the dance! They're starting again now! Introductions are not the custom. Get a partner! Come on!" and suiting action to words, as he always did, Brewster took Berger by the arm and fairly jerked him to his feet, and was off in the dance again.

Brewster's impetuosity had unnerved him for an instant, but when he came to he found himself looking down into the mischievous, sparkling eyes of a comely young señorita. Was it the power of Brewster's suggestion or command? Or was it a combination of powers and forces, some of which we have mentioned, that caused him to yield? He had no time to analyze causes or motives. The next moment he was swinging his partner into the dance, submerged in the intoxication of revelry.

From that time on until the break of day no time was lost by our ranger friends. Each and every moment had

its pressing obligations which commanded their prompt and immediate attention.

Adjoining the hall on the opposite side from the cantina were two store rooms for pelts and hides. A dozen or more of the "grandmas" had appropriated one of these rooms for a nursery and cared for the younger children, while their mothers enjoyed the dance. The pelts made very good beds on which to lay the youngsters when they became sleepy, or for "grandma" herself if she took a little too much wine. Before midnight the ballroom had been cleared of the children; and in fact after that hour the dancers were almost entirely the "younger set".

The other room served as a depository for the "drunks". Considering the size of the crowd, the proportion was not great,—few had enough money to completely satisfy their thirsts. Nor were the brawls and fights of a very serious nature,—much of the disorder being simply a good natured, riotous carousal. It may as well be said here, however, that some became so interested in the drinks that they forgot to return to dance. That did not at all disturb the others, though, as there were more dancers at all times than there was room to accommodate. Tom Cady was, of course, the officer who policed the hall and vicinity. His business was good even in the early evening; but, as the revelry of the night advanced, his duties became more strenuous. Often he would be called to the cantina to arrest violators of the peace who could not be handled by the bartenders, and he would come back across the dance hall dragging a prisoner by the coat collar, and throw him into the above mentioned room. Twice during the night Brewster assisted Cady when the disorderly became too numerous.

Once in a while Cady relieved some noisy boisterous "drunk" of his firearms or knife. There was a hogshead standing in one corner of the hall into which he threw such weapons. After the first few dances Brewster and Berger, with Cady's permission, deposited their chaps and spurs in this hogshead for safe-keeping. Berger was about

to let his six shooter go in too, when Brewster stopped him by advising: "Better keep it; you may need it."

Removing their chaps did not detract from their appearances. On the contrary it disclosed in Brewster's case a pair of "Service uniform" riding trousers supported by a belt decorated with twenty-dollar gold pieces, and snugly encased below the knees by his fancily stitched, scallop-topped, alligator boots. Berger wore his corduroys outside his boot tops, which made him look taller, more impressive than before. They did not remove their hats,—very few of the men did,—simply shoving them to the back of their heads or cocking them over one ear as fancy dictated.

Jealousy is the only thing that will incite a Mexican into open fight. This element is strong in his nature—and when excited, he fights to kill. Two or three times during the night fights of this kind assumed a serious aspect—knives were drawn—and prompt action was necessary. Cady's alert watchfulness, however, enabled him to anticipate these occurrences, and he was always on hand just at the psychological moment. Everyone seemed afraid of him. When he gave a command, it was obeyed. It would not be pleasant to imagine what tragedies might have been enacted if it had not been for his presence. No attempt will be made to describe the loves, hates, jealousies, or tragedies that were born at that baile—or the culmination thereof. The recording angel will be busy writing that down till doomsday,—surely a task too great for mortal man.

Just at the break of day the dance broke up. The rangers fished their chaps and spurs out of the hoghead, thanking Cady for his kindness. When they had them properly adjusted and were about to mount their horses, Brewster's reluctance to depart took form of word and action—"Let's kiss a few of 'em good-bye before we leave, Berger."

He did not need to jerk Berger to his feet this time—mere suggestion was enough. Before the words were

fairly out of his mouth Berger was rushing back to the hall, closely followed by Brewster. For a few minutes there was what a Westerner would call a "rough house." An Easterner, witnessing it, might have been reminded of the kissing games he used to play back at the church sociables.

Finally, as Brewster and Berger mounted their horses, they had the relieved, satisfied feeling of a duty well performed.

"Thought you said you didn't 'sabe' Mexican dances. 'Pears to me you 'sabe muy bien' not only the dances, but the dancers too."

"I never did dance any of those dances before. At home, of course, there are more white people than Mexicans, and we don't mix very much in a social way. I have watched them dance, but they do not have any such music as this was to-night, nor do they dance like these people. Those at home always dance kind of lifeless like." Embarrassed for words to express himself further, he finally added: "There was surely no lack of life at this dance."

Brewster sarcastically remarked: "Well, you did mighty well for a new beginner. Seemed to use good judgment in selecting instructresses. There's nothing wrong with your eye."

"Nor yours," Berger quickly retorted.

Their eyes met; a broad grin covered their faces; and they broke out into a loud laugh, ending in the long shrill "yep-e-e-ee" of the range men when exultant and expressing themselves.

CHAPTER VIII

WILD HORSES

Hardy awoke early, as was his habit. When he tried to move, he found that his anatomy consisted of a loosely connected conglomeration of sore spots and stiff joints. It was only with considerable discomfort that he was able to walk about. A small drink of whisky, however, served to limber him up internally, and he even rubbed some on the sore spots externally. One shoulder was very badly sprained, and he could not use that arm much.

As he kindled the fire, he said to himself, half aloud: "I reckon I should bury that dog and destroy the evidence before the boys come." But his lame shoulder made the task seem too great, and at that moment the boys appeared in view, riding over the crest of the hill half a mile to the west, so he gave up the idea.

He had the coffee pot on and was slicing some bacon when Berger and Brewster rode up.

"Buenos dias, amigo."

"Como estan ustedes?"

The morning salutations having been jovially exchanged in "Mexicano", they dropped back into good old reliable English, Brewster leading off:

"Well, Hardy, old sport, I see you still have your beautiful saddle",— and, coming a little closer to admire again its rich decoration, he noticed something more—"and what's this? A dead dog, sure as I'm born. Shot through the head, too."

Hardy lost no time interrupting. He began to explain, his manner plainly showing that he was not proud of the deed that he had committed. "Sometime along about midnight, I reckon, I thought I heard somethin', raised up in bed, and could see somethin' crawlin' up toward the saddle. I reckon I was about half asleep until I shot.

Then I sure did wake up,—was afraid I'd killed a man. I'm most awful ashamed of it, fellers. A man hadn't ought to have nightmares like that."

Berger and Brewster laughed long and heartily. They could not see that it was anything to be particularly ashamed of, and complimented Hardy on his marksmanship.

Hardy retorted: "No marksmanship about it. The dog wasn't thirty feet away. A man had ought to think afore he shoots, an' I didn't this time. It's all right to shoot in the proper time an' place; but this a goin' off half cocked is poor business. Suppose that had been a greaser; I wouldn't a been justified in shootin' 'im, an' the poor dog was only smellin' 'round for somethin' to eat. If it had been a man, the proper thing to a done would a been to tie 'im up to a tree an' just beat hell out o' him with a rope or somethin'; but killin',—that's never called for except in self-defense, and not then if you can get by without. I'm just damned awful ashamed o' this stunt. Throw your rope over that dog, Berger, an' drag him away from camp. I'm goin' to shut up."

Berger and Brewster had not yet recovered from their amusement. It was plain to see that Hardy was unduly excited. He was ashamed and provoked at himself for displaying such poor self-control. No doubt, when aroused in the night, the thought of someone trying to steal his prize had caused him to act without his usual deliberation, and he had shot before he was fully awake. The whole affair had probably not consumed but a few seconds of time.

There had been something in the tone of his voice as he pronounced the last sentence, "I'm going to shut up", that implied that he did not wish to hear more about the matter, and Berger and Brewster smothered their feelings in deference to his, and, as requested, Berger dragged the dead dog away.

When he returned to camp he changed the subject by saying, "Throw your saddle off, Brewster, and I will take your horse out and hobble him with ours and bring

in one of our horses for you to ride to-day." Then, turning to Hardy, he asked: "We had better find Cyclone and try to catch him to-day, hadn't we?"

Hardy replied in his old time drawl,—the tension removed, he was himself again,—"I suppose so, though the old fool is hardly worth the effort. All a man ever gets out of him, he earns most awful good and plenty; but I can't help likin' the old devil. Bring us all fresh mounts—Brewster and I will have breakfast ready when you come back. Get 'Shorty' for me."

Brewster had dismounted and washed his hands. "If you don't mind, Hardy, I will make a little batch of biscuits. Then we won't have to build a fire at noon." Even while speaking he had rolled down the top of the flour sack all around, made a little hollow in the flour, and sifted proper proportions of salt and baking powder, mixing it into the flour with a spoon. Noticing the sack of corn meal, he mixed in a cup of that too.

Hardy reached over with his crooked stick poker and placed the Dutch oven on the coals. Then he picked up the cover and put it on the coals in another place, replying: "Sure! Fly to it! Make anything you like from whatever stuff you can find. We have some old bread, but biscuits will taste good for a change. I'll fry enough bacon to go with 'em for dinner too, and cook up a little fruit. We've been too excited lately to pay much attention to cookin'. How'd the kid make it at the baile?"

By this time Brewster had poured some water in the hollow in the flour and mixed it in,—working up the dough firm enough so he could mould it in his hands. Pouring a little of the bacon grease into the Dutch oven, he put in the dough moulded in the form of biscuits, set the oven on a bed of live coals, put on the cover and shoveled some live coals on top, at the same time replying to Hardy's query:

"Well, sir, at first I thought he was a 'sissy', but when he got started, he sure made up for lost time. Those señoritas were just crazy over him. Whenever he looked

at one, she would simply melt with joy. But the 'hom-bres' didn't get much joy out of it. Some of them got mighty jealous, and showed it. I thought he didn't realize it, but later found out better. He's just simply got nerve.

"I kept an eye on him. You know he wouldn't touch a drop of their booze—wouldn't even drink a swig of beer. So he went out once in a while an' took a drink from the water bag on his saddle horn, as the horses were tied in close.

"There was a big black devil—he's Ortega's sheep foreman—who was getting mighty jealous. He had had too much to drink too. Well, he came out from under cover somewhere when Berger was drinking. Berger saw him just in time to whirl an' face him, as he drew his knife. I jumped out the door, but before I had time to cover him it was all over. That greaser had no more than pulled his knife when Berger's long arm shot out an' hooked him right on the point of the jaw. He must have had some training, for when he landed his arm was stiff straight an' his whole weight back of it. The way that Mexican tumbled was a pretty sight to behold.

"I slipped back in. Berger came leisurely in a few minutes later, an' joined the dance just as careless like as ever. Hasn't mentioned the matter, nor I. But the boy's got nerve! Put that in your pipe. He's got some things to learn, but he's no 'sissy'."

"I believe I have met that dirty, black devil of a greaser myself," Hardy drawled.

"He's supposed to be a bad man," Brewster continued. "Ortega run onto him somewhere. He's an old Mexico greaser, an' has the 'rep' for being pretty handy with a knife. He's right smart bigger'n most of these fellers here—makes Ortega a good caporal for his sheep camp. All the herders are 'fraid as death of him. They say he's one o' Ortega's bushwhackers. He and Tom Cady and a few others do his dirty work for him."

Brewster was starting upon a subject in which Hardy seldom showed interest. He would learn all these things

soon enough anyway, so he changed the subject: "Reckon we ought to go over and congratulate the Senator on his election, eh?"

Just at this point Berger rode up with the horses, but Brewster continued the conversation. "Certainly you'd ought to. It would give him such a fine opportunity to present you with that 'sweepstakes' money. Then, too, you could show your generosity by treating the crowd, and thus add to your present popularity. There will be some thirsty 'hombres' this morning. I don't suppose there is the price of a drink in the whole crowd."

Hardy replied: "I'll sure set 'em up, if I get the sweepstakes. There not being the price of a drink in the crowd is only half of it. A whole lot of 'em are in debt enough to keep 'em peons for another year. That's a foxy idea of the Senator's to pay 'em off in cash on election day. Don't suppose they'd seen so much cash since last election. He's got it all back in his safe this morning, though."

During this conversation they had been washing for breakfast, and, as Berger dried his face on the towel, he stated his view: "They will have next election to look forward to, anyway. We kids used to begin to plan for next Christmas just as soon as one had passed. These people seem to me a whole lot like children. If there were no restraints placed over them, conditions might be worse. Perhaps Old Ortega is a blessing to these people after all."

"There's some truth in your observation, all right, Berger; but if you will allow me to, I will add a little to it. I'd call him a blessing in disguise!"

They all laughed at Brewster's attempt at wit, and, squatting as usual on their saddle blankets around the slicker, began to store away very liberal quantities of pancakes and syrup, bacon, corn-cake biscuits, coffee, and fruit. They were not well informed on table etiquette and ate their fruit last, making a kind of short-cake with the pancakes.

After the laugh Brewster continued: "It's not such

a dead sure thing that the old boy is a Senator. Of course he has absolute control over this precinct, but there are several precincts in this Senatorial district. Each one, of course, is controlled to a certain extent by a patron like Ortega, but not all of them by any means are for him. In fact, quite a few are his enemies. Then the white vote is beginning to be a factor."

Brewster paused between bites and Berger spoke up: "I should think his chance of election would be poor indeed, then."

"No," said Brewster, "he will probably be elected. You see he controls a pretty big vote here in his own precinct, and it gives him trading stock so to speak. The other patrons need his votes and have to support him to get them. Naturally, he had his political machine perfected before he dared aspire to office himself. He is not popular among the patrons; he is only powerful. Some of the patrons are mighty decent men—come from old Spanish stock, and have fine families. They treat their peons pretty well, too. Ortega is an exception; he came from the outlaw class and is a kind of brigand like his father was."

Berger and Brewster felt the need of sleep and rest, but duty demanded that Cyclone be located as soon as possible before he had drifted away with some of the Mexican ponies, and so after breakfast they started out to hunt for him. As they passed among the tents, it was evident that but few were making preparations to leave that morning. Many crawled into bed as soon as the morning meal was over, and would spend the day there. Brewster thought it was taking too much of a chance to leave the prize saddle at their camp unprotected, though Hardy had put it inside one of the tents, so it was decided that Hardy should not ride out of sight of camp, but would stay around close by and look over the little bands of Mexican horses as Cyclone might be among them. In fact Cyclone might be almost anywhere—far or near.

They also decided that it was as yet too early in the

morning to call on the Senator, as he might still be in bed. It would be much better to find Cyclone first, and then Hardy, mounted on the prize saddle, could ride the winning horse when he went to pay his respects to "His Honor".

About noon they found him with a bunch of Ortega's cow ponies. It would have been useless to try to run Cyclone down without a relay of horses, and as Berger knew where these ponies were used to being corraled, they carefully worked them along to the corral. Once inside, Brewster took his lariat, and, swinging a big loop above his head, sent it down over Cyclone's.

Cyclone was still very excited. He had not forgotten the race, nor the pistol shots. Brewster tried to work along the rope up to his head, so as to make a hackamore, but old Cyclone would have nothing of the kind. Rearing, striking at him with his forefeet, teeth bared, ears laid, he squealed his warning.

At this instant Berger's rope swished through the air under Cyclone's feet, catching a hind one and coming up taut with a snap. Old Cyclone struck the ground broadside, strung out.

"I told you he is dangerous. There's no use trying to be gentle with him." As he said this, Berger dismounted from his horse, which stood holding the rope taut and watching every move. This horse had helped brand many an animal and knew his duty and could be depended upon to perform it. Berger slipped his bandana over Cyclone's eyes.

Brewster spoke to his horse, which walked up a step, allowing the rope around Cyclone's neck to slacken. Cyclone had no notion of trying to rebel further—the blindfold had taken his nerve. So Brewster spoke to his horse again, and he walked forward, allowing slack enough to "build a hackamore" around old Cyclone's head.

As they removed the rope from his hind foot and the bandana from his eyes, Cyclone sprang to his feet. Brewster led the way out of the corral with Cyclone securely

fastened to the saddle horn—once more submissive to the bonds of the domesticated horse, which he so hated.

On the way back to camp they met the Mayor Domo with Tom Cady by his side, driving the tandem at a breakneck pace with his usual careless ease. No time for congratulations; simply common salutation. The Mayor Domo was no doubt delivering the returns of the election in person. He would be at the railroad the next morning in time to catch the early morning train to the Capital. Hardy would not have the opportunity to ride old Cyclone and the prize saddle into his august presence—nor to collect the sweepstakes.

When they had passed, Brewster remarked: "Hardy won't care. He has had his fun, and I don't much think he cares to see the Mayor Domo anyway."

That night they all went to bed early and slept,—Berger and Brewster not waking the following morning until Hardy beat on a tin pail at the door and shouted: "Breakfast is ready."

While eating breakfast, Brewster stated his mission: "Two or three weeks ago, I had a talk with Old Mack over the phone. I was at Eagle Ranger Station on the east side. They have a phone out there from the Supervisor's office. It's to be extended over to my station next spring.

"But what I was going to say is, I had a talk with Old Mack, and he told me to come over here and get acquainted with you fellers as soon as I could conveniently. So I picked election day as a convenient time—thought you would be here to see the fun.

"Old Mack said he was particularly anxious to get the west line of this district established. You see when I was just a kid, I dragged a chain around for the surveyor who ran out part of those lines; and I remember where some of the corners are. Old Ortega sent in a petition at that time and got the land office to have a survey made so he could locate some of his cowpunchers

and sheep herders at the principal water holes, and prove up homesteads."

"Has he title to all this land he has fenced?" Hardy asked.

"Well, I should say not! He has a quarter section including the placeta here and part of his farm in his own name. And other members of his family hold two or three more quarters, perhaps. He hasn't many relatives. Most of them were killed off in the feudal wars when he was a kid, and he has never married, so he has no family of his own."

"A whole lot of the land he has under fence, then, is really public land, is it?"

"Yes, 'most all of it. None of the people up the creek or toward the mountains have any title or filing on their places. No survey has ever been made in that direction. Guess Old Ortega thought it would take too much money to pay the filing fees and make the proofs; and then, too, the land would be taxed. It is really better for his purposes to have the land as it is—free to use and no taxes."

Here Berger interrupted. "Yet you say that he got up a petition and secured a survey by the Land Office of certain places to the west of here. Why did he do that if it is better to have the land—free to use and no taxes? I am just asking for information. I don't quite understand why he should desire some places surveyed and not others."

"Well, it's this way, Berger. The range west of here is a dry country, having only watering places enough to barely do for the stock in winter. By getting clear title to the land where these watering places are, he could control the whole range for miles around. Just at the time he secured the survey there were some large stock outfits crowding in from that side,—one big English cattle company in particular,—and Old Ortega felt a little shaky about his winter range, so he took steps to protect it.

"In the summer a good many of these watering places dry up, so the range can't be used. By controlling the water on this winter range, his summer range is safe,—

for one would be no good to a big outfit without the other. He couldn't have cornered the water here, anyway, because of all these creeks and springs toward the mountains. But it wasn't necessary so long as he had obtained absolute control of a strip of country fifty or one hundred miles wide adjoining it, and fenced it off completely from the rest of the world, as you might say."

Berger was not yet satisfied and asked still another question. "Why couldn't those cowboys and sheep herders who actually held title to the land where the watering places are sell to the big cattle company you spoke of?"

"You've been here nearly long enough to know the answer to your own question. If they valued their lives they couldn't. Disloyalty to their Mayor Domo of that nature would surely mean death. That question never came up, anyway. You see they didn't have to prove up for seven years after making their first filing—and sometimes did not prove up then, but simply relinquished in favor of another. Some of the places have not been proved up yet, but are simply held by a filing. The big cattle company knew it was useless to try to buy the relinquishments from those peons, and gave it up as a bad job. It wasn't any too safe for their men to ride over this way.

"About that time was when the range wars were at their worst. One of the cattle company's men killed seven of Ortega's sheep herders in one day. And of course Ortega's snipers did not hesitate to pick off a cowpuncher whenever they got a chance. That was when Old Ortega brought in Tom Cady and another white man by the name of Bill Dobbs. Dobbs was killed. But Ortega finally won out, and no one has since disputed his control of this range.

"Homesteading some of these places put the law on his side, but he still depends on his snipers. It is not the place for a nester to settle and try to build up a stock business yet. Ortega is a coward himself. He daresn't go outside the walls of his placeta without taking Tom Cady with him."

"What they say about Ortega having a kingdom here is about right then?" Berger asked conclusively.

"Absolutely! No king ever exercised more complete dominion over a country than Ortega does right here. Of course he has done some good for his people, but it has usually been due to some selfish motive on his part. A school is held at the main placeta for a few months each winter. That is one thing Ortega has done for his people. However, he got the school because the Territory appropriated a certain sum for that purpose, and of course he was willing to have it expended here—for would it not eventually come to his store? No English was taught in this school—but what was the use? No one in that neighborhood spoke it."

Hardy turned the conversation back to the essential details that he wished to know by asking: "Has he got all the water holes along the west line in his control? Where will we camp without trespassing on private holdings?"

"He has practically all of the watering places that are large enough to water, say, one hundred head of stock; but there are quite a few little seep springs where we can get plenty of water, such as it is, for camp purposes."

"It's mighty lucky Old Mack sent you over to show us around a bit. If Berger and I had gone out there alone, I reckon Old Ortega would have filed a trespass suit against us. Old Mack knew what he was doing."

"You just know he did. He's mighty anxious to get that west line posted too. Says he dares not bring a trespass suit until the line of the Forest is definitely established and posted on the ground. That's the reason he had to let all the stock get out of the Forest this fall without paying any grazing fees."

By this time the dishes were washed; and a few minutes later everything was packed and they were on their way, —Brewster ahead, leading old Cyclone, who had the honor of carrying the prize saddle. Hardy did not care to ride it, as he said it would make his muscles still sorer to break in a new saddle.

Strung out single file in the narrow trail, with lead and pack animals between them, it was not convenient to carry on conversation; nor would it have been customary. The trail they followed ran out diagonally from the mountains toward the plains. The country was rolling,—first a ridge, then a draw,—but they were gradually working down to a lower elevation. The ridges were thinly forested with piñon and cedar trees. A fairly good stand of grama grass grew between the sagebrush in the draws or valleys.

As they advanced toward the plain, the land became less rolling, the trees more scattering, with grass and sagebrush predominating. The grass was already dead ripe, the lopsided heads hanging low with nutritious seeds. The dry fall weather had cured it perfectly. It would be as good feed throughout the winter for the range stock as the hay in any Eastern farmer's barns.

They passed large bands of sheep,—the breeding ewes which were going to be held over. The burros,—“Rocky Mountain Canaries” as they are often spoken of because of their voices,—packed with the herders' camp outfits and provisions, were also being driven along. Their packs, covered over with the big canvas “tarps” and bound around with the pack ropes, were so large in proportion to the size of the animals that they looked like huge packages tied around with a string. To see them moving slowly along through the sage—the long ears and little tails being about all that could be seen of the animals themselves—was surely comical. But the rangers merely glanced at them. This was a common, not a comical, sight to them. It simply meant that the sheep were on the drive,—on the way to their winter feeding grounds.

Once, toward noon, their progress was interrupted. Brewster's big bay stopped short and stood snorting, nostrils dilated, ears pointing forward, his whole body quivering with fear. Coiled in the trail, head raised to strike, its bead like eyes expressing murder, forked tongue playing in and out showing its venomous fangs, lay a

large rattlesnake, giving its warning, the dry rattle of bones,—all in all, the most blood curdling, grewsome sight and formidable enemy that man or beast can encounter. An instant only elapsed until Brewster's pearl-handled six shooter had proven that its purpose was useful as well as ornamental; the snake's head was severed from its body, hanging only by the skin on either side.

Old Cyclone shot into the air at the report of the gun, but Brewster's big bay on the other end of the hackamore rope brought him to earth again with a thud. Brewster dismounted and cut off the rattles, adding them to the collection already adorning his braided hair hat band.

"He was an old one; had eleven rattles. Mighty late in the fall for them to be out, but then it's hot to-day. Man! How I hate a rattler! Never let one get away if I can help it; it's a crime to."

Neither Hardy nor Berger said a word; there was nothing to say. Brewster remounted and made a detour around the dead snake, as did the whole procession. The journey was then resumed at the same running-walk gait which they had been traveling all day.

They did not stop for dinner, simply chewing a little jerky at lunch time as they rode silently along.

Along toward mid-afternoon, Brewster turned from the trail and led out across the country. Hardy and Berger followed, asking no questions. They were now beginning to see here and there a cactus plant and a mesquite bush. Occasionally a horned toad was noticed sitting stolidly by, enjoying the sun. Or a lizard would crook his head to one side, taking a look with one eye and then the other as if to confirm his vision,—what strange sight was this that he beheld? Then, with a movement too swift for eye to follow, he would dart to cover under a mesquite bush. All these things, together with the rattlesnake and the scarcity of water, clearly indicated that they were passing beyond the influence of the mountain into that of the plain.

As they came out from cover of one of the now scattering clumps of trees on top of a knoll, they scared up a

small band of wild horses. Yes, "scared up" is the proper term, for as soon as the horses saw them, they were as scared as any wild animal ever was at sight of man. They ran as if their lives depended upon it, as no doubt they thought they did. The stallion seemed to be able to outrun the mares and colts without effort, and kept circling around them,—now in the lead with head high, mane and tail flowing, coaxing them on; then, falling behind, running back and forth with head lowered, ears laid, and teeth bared threateningly, driving them before him as a dog drives cattle.

Just as they were disappearing over the ridge, the stallion whirled around and snorting long and loud, stood looking defiantly at the intruders for a moment or two; then with another wild, loud snort, he turned and trotted on after his family.

The saddle horses had stopped voluntarily, and with ears forward had apparently watched with great interest the movements of the wild horses. Was it to them a glimpse of the life they longed to lead? There was little doubt about it in Cyclone's case, at least.

The men, too, were spellbound with admiration. There is something about a band of wild horses that is always fascinating to a range man.

Berger finally broke the silence. "Wasn't that stallion a dandy, though! How proud, lordly, and defiant he acted, after he thought he had his family at a safe distance!"

"Some fine hoss all right," Brewster remarked. "There's lots of 'em farther out."

Hardy drawled in his usual practical way: "They will bother our hosses nights. Them wild studs will sometimes kill a geldin'."

As they started along again, Brewster remarked: "They are probably watering at the spring we are headed for. It's just over the rim there."

An hour later they were on the brink of the rim or shelf. Directly before them was a precipice with perhaps a one hundred and seventy-five or two hundred foot drop,



"Brewster led the way along the edge of the rim rock."

running in a jagged line to the right and left as far as they could see. At the foot of this precipice the plain began again. Taking a new start at a lower level, it extended on out into vastness itself,—surely safe now from all unfavorable influences which the mountains might exert.

This was a new sight to Berger. He had lived in the mountains all his life. And, as he looked out over the plain, he was filled with a feeling of awe. There was something so magnificent in its grandeur and vastness, a silent witness of the greatness of God's power. At first the whole plain seemed even and unbroken as far as he could see. Then he began to distinguish the closer objects, and presently broke out with the exclamation: "Why! There are the wild horses! See them, right down there!" pointing them out. "Look at them go! The stallion has sighted us!"

Brewster and Hardy were not so enthused. They had seen the horses before Berger had, but had made no comments. They had also seen other things. A long way off to the right a flock of sheep were being driven. The cloud of dust, indistinct as it was, proved that. And to the left, away out at the very edge of their range of vision, a herd of cattle could be seen moving along.

"There is a fine winter range country," Hardy remarked. "The Mayor Domo must be gettin' his winter camps located. Reckon we will find a camp at the spring, Brewster?"

"No, I don't think so. You see there are larger water holes a few miles on either side of us, and I don't think they usually have a camp at this little spring. With camps at the other places, however, the wild hosses will be obliged to water here."

"I reckon your reasonin' is right. Those hosses will be a most awful nuisance. I hate to kill a hoss, and it's more'n they are worth to catch 'em and break 'em."

Brewster led the way along the edge of the rim rock until they came to a narrow trail winding in and out among the boulders, which led the way down. On the

one hand there was a jagged rocky wall running nearly straight up, while on the other side was a perpendicular drop, but the horses made no missteps. So long as the trail was wide enough for their feet they were safe.

At the bottom the trail led around a point of rocks into a little "rincon," or cove; and there was the spring. Packs were removed, horses hobbled and picketed, tents put up, the spring shoveled out, and supper prepared and eaten. Our rangers were again at home. And, yes, they had actually dared to put up the American flag here in the very center of the realm of the Mayor Domo.

Lying stretched out on their saddle blankets with their saddles for head rests, enjoying at once the warmth from the camp fire and the chill of the evening, Hardy filled his pipe and Brewster rolled his cigarette.

Their holiday was over. The men were no longer at a picnic, or on a camping or hunting trip for pleasure, recreation, or excitement. Uncle Sam had decided to protect, preserve, and utilize for the benefit of the people some of his vast domain, which had heretofore been carelessly neglected. And these men were his advance agents, employed to do a very necessary, preliminary work. He expected them to exercise their best efforts and abilities in the furtherance of this work. So at this time their minds very naturally turned to the work before them,—the work Old Mack had outlined for them to do.

After Hardy had puffed at his pipe for some minutes, during which time he had been gazing off through the late twilight across the plain, he turned to Brewster and said: "How far are we now from that northwest corner, Brewster?"

"Oh, I should say about ten miles; the line runs west of us here. There aren't many trees along it,—just enough so you can post a notice every quarter of a mile. But farther south it runs closer to the mountains, and there is good timber along it there. In fact, there is considerable good timber land outside."

"I suppose we should have 'Forest Boundary' notices to post that line right," Hardy said, thinking aloud.

"Yes," Brewster replied. "That's one thing Old Mack was most emphatic about. He wants that line legally posted. I have plenty of notices at my station.

"And, by the way, Old Mack said he wanted us to get together and decide on a boundary line between our districts. He wants to give me a slice of this new territory and cut a piece off of the other end of mine to go onto Blair's district."

Berger's curiosity was aroused, and he asked with a considerable show of interest: "Who is Blair?"

Brewster continued: "Blair is the ranger in charge of the district to the south of you. This west line you are about to run will take you over to his district. Old Mack said he wanted you fellers and Blair to get acquainted, too, and decide on a line between your districts."

Turning to Hardy, Berger remarked: "We are just beginning to learn where our near neighbors live." Then, turning again to Brewster, he asked: "How far is it to where Blair lives?"

"That's hard to say. He don't live any place in particular. Don't suppose he camps twice in the same place,—just drifts around over his district. Old Mack wanted to have some one ride with him. It's a tough country over there—but he said he didn't need anybody to guard him,—could take care of himself in any man's country. There's not a white man on his district, except one old pure blooded Spanish family. It runs into the Indian country. Lots of wild horses over there.

"Old Mack sent me over there on an errand last summer, and Blair and me run onto a bunch of Indians running wild horses. One of 'em caught a wild stud, and you'd ought to've seen him handle him. There was a log corral there, and he put the stud in there for safe keeping over night, and in the morning that Indian went in there on foot with his rope in his hand. And that wild stud come after him, with ears laid back an' mouth wide open, just making as ugly a face as he knowed how to—an' squealing. You could have heard him squeal for two miles.

"That Indian just stood stock still an' grinned an' looked that stud right straight in the eye. Well, you know that stud would run for him that a way, as though he was a goin' to eat him alive, but just before he'd get to him, he'd turn and run the other way,—just didn't have the nerve to carry out his threat. That Indian standing there looking him straight in the eye an' never flinching just chilled his blood, I guess.

"I don't mind bustin' a bronc or wild hoss either, for that matter myself, but I give it to that Indian. I just ain't got the nerve or patience to tame 'em that way. I want a rope on 'em all the time, and either be on their back or on the back of another good hoss. This standing around on the ground and letting a wild stud run at you that a way looks pretty risky to me.

"But you know that doggoned 'Injun' kept worrying that hoss till he had him sweating like a blue steer—the lather was just running down his legs and drippin' off his belly. When he'd sulk, the Indian would throw out his rope with a flip an' cut him on the rump,—make him mad,—and he would come for him again.

"Then the Indian began to speak to him. I don't know what he said,—it was just one word, but I soon learned that it meant 'Come here!' The hoss would stand and 'mule', and the Indian would give that command right sharp an' flip his rope out an' give him a cut on the rump. The hoss would get mad and come toward him. He'd got so now he didn't bother to lay his ears and open his mouth, or make any faces, or try to scare the Indian to death by squealing or any other kind of a threat. He'd just run toward the Indian to get away from that rope a playin' on his rump. And, as he'd come up, the Indian would put out his hand an' speak kind like, as if he wanted to pet him.

"Well, sir, do you know that in the course of an hour or so that Indian was pettin' an' rubbin' that hoss's nose with his hand, and the hoss was standing there trembling all over, scared almost to death of the Indian's hand, but so much more scared of gettin' a clip on the rump with

the knot on the end of that rope, if he turned to run, that he just stood and let him pet him on the nose. Then he began to work his hand back along his cheek toward his neck, all the time a grinnin' an' a saying something like pet names to that hoss.

"Maybe he'd get up on his neck a little too far or make too quick a move, that would give the hoss a new scare an' make him break an' whirl to run. But don't you ever think he'd get away without that old hard knot on the end of the rope a hittin' him on the same old sore spot on his rump, an' it would keep a hittin' till he'd turn around an' just walk up to that Indian. He was learning that pettin' wasn't quite so bad as gettin' beat up with a rope.

"That Indian kep' on that a way till he could handle that hoss all over. That wild stallion would just stand and tremble and let him pet 'im on the neck an' rub 'im on the back.

"Then he asked for his saddle. We throwed it over the corral fence to him. And he called that hoss up to him an' began to push out the saddle just as he had his hand at first, an' it wasn't a half hour after that before he had 'im saddled an' standin' there, letting him pet 'im on the nose as nice as you please.

"After a little he began to make believe as if he was a goin' to get into the saddle. He'd get almost up into the seat and drop down onto the ground again an' say 'Come here',—or that was what it meant,—and that hoss just daresn't move. Finally, he just naturally swung into the seat an' sat there an' told us to let down the corral poles. When that hoss seen the opening, he started for it like a flash, but the Indian just said 'Come here' right sharp, an' that wild hoss stopped short an' stood an' shook, trembling like he would fall to pieces. That had just burned into his brains I guess. The Indian sat up there and grinned broader than ever, an' pretty soon was a ridin' that wild hoss all around."

Brewster was through. He had told his tale and now settled back, pulling the "makings" from his pocket to

roll a cigarette. Berger, who had been listening attentively, now spoke up: "That must have been an interesting sight. I have enjoyed hearing you describe it. I wish some Indian would come along and break that wild stallion we saw to-day. I would like to have him in my mount."

Hardy also had listened attentively to Brewster's narrative and evidently enjoyed it as much as Berger, but he had no comments to make. His thoughts very soon turned again to the work before them. Taking his pipe from his mouth and looking at Berger in his sincere, thoughtful manner, he said: "I've been thinkin', kid, maybe you'd better go with Brewster to-morrow, an' get some of them boundary notices. You can take Buck to pack 'em back on. Ride 'im one way if you want to. Brewster will tell you what they call the creeks and ridges, and you can put them on your map. Learn the country; you needn't hurry back. What do you say?"

Berger was delighted to go over to Brewster's station with him and expressed himself so. Brewster, too, was glad to have a companion on the long ride.

"And," continued Hardy, turning to Brewster, "if you can take care of that new saddle for me, I'll send it over, too, for safe keepin'. I don't want to ride it this winter."

Brewster agreed that this was the right thing to do, as he had plenty of barn room in which he could store it under lock and key. So the plans for the morrow's work were made. Hardy would ride with them and have Brewster show him a corner stone on that surveyed line. Then the boys would go on and he would return to camp and look after things. He must watch those wild horses for a day or two at least, and keep them away from the spring so they would leave that vicinity.

Hardy pulled his bed out from his tent, and with it under one arm and his rifle over the other, started out into the night saying: "I'll keep an eye on them wild hosses to-night. That wild stud will be raisin' hell before morning.—Good night, boys."

"Buenos noches, amigo," they replied in unison.

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE

The wild horses made only one visit during the night. Hardy raised up in bed and fired his forty-five into the air to scare them away; but Cyclone stampeded, broke his picket rope, and was away with the wild bunch before the echoes of the shot had ceased to reverberate along the rim rock. Hardy had picketed Cyclone near camp as a precaution against this happening. There was probably a kink in the rope, for when he came to the end of it in the first mad rush of his stampede it had snapped, and now he was loose to experience the wild free life which had been the one great desire of his heart.

As Hardy watched Cyclone join the wild band and race away with them through the sage in the moonlight, he again raised his forty-five high above his head and sent a parting shot after them, saying aloud to himself: "I'll give 'em a good 'boo' anyway, an' maybe they won't bother us again to-night. That crazy old fool, Cyclone! Doggone his old hide! Never was worth half the trouble he's made; glad he's gone—good riddance of bad rubbish; hope never to see hide nor hair of him again! Now maybe I can sleep"; and, settling back into his blankets and curling up in a comfortable position, he was soon fast asleep—no, wide awake.

Try as he might, he could not get old Cyclone off of his mind. The more bold speeches he made trying to convince himself that he was glad the "locoed old fool" was gone, the more restless he became. Finally he had to admit that he wasn't glad at all; that he wished he had not broken his rope; that he needed him in his business; that he had been planning all along, kind of subconsciously, to saddle him up after the boys left, or at least sometime before Berger came back, and run down

that wild stud. He would then rope him, brand him, and add him to his string of saddle horses.

He finally came to the conclusion that he would watch those wild horses a day or two, learn their habits, and then decide on the best course to take. But one thing was certain—Cyclone would again be in his string, and perhaps the wild stud, too. With his decision made and the matter settled in his mind, he fell asleep and slept soundly.

At daybreak Brewster awakened him with the information that breakfast was nearly ready, and the joshing remark: "I advised you to collect that sweepstakes money from the Senator the other day. Now you'll never have another chance to win such a stake,—your race hoss has taken wings and flown away."

This remark nettled Hardy, greatly to Brewster's amusement. Hardy was really a little angry, but he did not wish to show it, as to do so would reveal his anxiety about the loss of Cyclone, and somehow he did not wish that to be known, especially by Brewster, who would doubtless make the most of it by more sarcastic and jocular remarks. So he fell back on his old friend Deliberation, and tried to act unconcerned while racking his brain for a suitable reply to make to Brewster's jibe.

Brewster, noticing his discomfiture, expressed his amusement by laughing long, loud, and heartily; but not wishing to carry a jest so far as to be a menace to the peace,—the expression on Hardy's face now plainly indicating that such a thing would be easily possible,—he concluded by saying, with a sincere show of good comradeship: "Never mind, Hardy. After breakfast we will take a turn apiece at running 'em down. We've got hosses enough to tire 'em out and run 'em down before night. We'll catch your race hoss—and also that stallion. He's a fine hoss for a broomtail—would go mighty good with that new saddle of yours."

Hardy had now had time to collect his thoughts and was at last ready with a reply. Nothing either in the expression of his face or in his voice showed that anything

unusual had happened. One might have thought that it was a very common occurrence for him to have a saddle horse run with the wild band when he did not care to use it, as he answered in his old time drawl: "Thanks, Brewster, but you boys have a long trip ahead of you. Berger's brought in Shorty—I'll ride him out with you and see that corner. Then when I need old Cyclone, I'll go out and get him."

It was plain that Hardy did not intend to have the plans for the day's work interfered with, even though Berger and Brewster wanted the sport of running those wild horses. Brewster had really wished to help Hardy catch his horse, but Hardy had so lightly spurned his offer that he could not resist making one more sarcastic remark to offset Hardy's commonplace disposal of the matter: "Well, just as you say, Hardy; but when you go after Cyclone, just bring in that pretty stallion too, if it's not too much trouble. I'd like mighty well to have him in my string when the work begins next spring."

"All right, Brewster, glad to do it—won't be any trouble at all. If you'll break in that new saddle of mine this winter, I'll let you have the stud in the spring. Berger and I will have him gentle for you by that time."

It was evident that Hardy was not joking. He intended to fulfill his part of the agreement. Both Berger and Brewster laughed as Brewster answered, this time with no trace of sarcasm: "It's a bargain, Hardy. I know you can do it, but you ought to let us fellers help you."

They all started out, found the corner, and the boys then went on as had been planned, while Hardy returned to camp. Packing up his outfit, he moved camp around the point into the next rincon, because he knew if it were left near the spring the horses would not come in to drink.

He had nearly made up his mind that this would be their winter camp. From what Brewster had said about the watering places, perhaps this was as good a place as any, if only they could get rid of that band of wild horses.

The grass was good and there was water enough. So he worked about camp and planned how he would best handle the wild horses and get Cyclone back safe and sound.

Berger had two horses with him. Cyclone was gone, so there were only three left, and none of these was fast enough to run down wild horses. These Hardy picketed near the camp. He would not ride much until Berger returned, and they would have plenty to eat during the daytime. He did not intend to let any of them be "eat up" by that wild stud. He would sleep by the spring nights and keep the wild horses from getting a drink, and hide in the brush and watch during the day. Perhaps the wild horses would become thirsty enough to come in to the spring by daylight; then would come his chance.

They had not drunk all that day nor the night before. They came in once that night. Hardy did not shoot at them this time, but simply stood up in his bed and watched them run down the draw. Yes. Old Cyclone was in the lead, the wildest in the bunch. Even the stallion could not overtake him.

As Hardy watched them, he was filled with admiration. Yes, Cyclone was his style of horse after all. He must have him back in his string.

The next night the wild horses were bolder. They came in twice and did not run far. They were now too thirsty to eat, and their one desire was water. Hardy noticed that each time as they approached, they would come over a rise to one side of the rincon, and that when they turned to run away Cyclone was always far in the lead, and ran straight down the little trail leading out into the open. This little trail passed under the limb of a piñon tree just at the mouth of the rincon.

Just before daylight Hardy hung a loop made with his best rope in the branches of this piñon tree over the trail. This would take care of Cyclone the next time he ran down it. Then he retreated to his hiding place at the other side of the rincon, taking with him another lariat rope and his rifle. He did not stop to cook breakfast,

but fell back on the old standby of jerky, biscuits, and good tobacco. The last he was simply devouring now. The nervous tension was beginning to tell. He knew that before long he would have his chance. He'd show Brewster and Berger that he was capable of taking care of his own mount, and get the stud too, as he had bargained.

The sky was cloudy, and the change in the atmosphere indicated plainly that a storm was brewing. It was already storming in the mountains. If it should rain, it would put water enough in the little hollows out on the plain that the wild horses would not have to come to the spring for water; then his chance would be lost. He must act before this happened.

Occasionally during the day the wild stallion would trot up into the rincon, bold and defiant,—stop, look, smell; then with a long, loud, wild snort of sudden fright, he would turn and run back to his charge. As he repeated this performance more frequently, the mares and colts came closer in each time, and he became bolder and bolder. Finally in mid-afternoon he trotted proudly up to the spring with his whole charge following. He had decided to take them to water. He was the first to drink, then fell back on guard while the mares and colts crowded in around the spring. Cyclone, the old fox, was of course the last to come.

Hardy knew this was his chance. Cautiously he pushed his rifle into position over a little projection on the side of the boulder. He must stun, but not kill him. He must pierce his neck with a bullet just above the vertebræ about halfway between his head and body.

Would that stallion stand still broadside for just an instant? No! He kept trotting back and forth! Whenever he stopped a moment, he was either facing him or turned the other way! There was no time to lose; something might stampede that wild band any moment; he must take a shot at him moving! So he raised the gun from its place on the rock, took quick aim, and fired.

The stallion dropped! But what attracted Hardy's

attention and admiration most was old Cyclone going down the trail. He was alone! The others were doing their best, but they were not keeping near enough to make him good company. Yes! He was running down the little trail as usual. Would the rope hold?

Hardy had no more time to watch the outcome. He must get to that stallion! If he had been successful in "creasing" him, he would soon spring to his feet and be off and at the head of his band again, wild and free. If he had killed him, it could not be helped. Rushing to him with his rope, he saw him try to raise his head. Jumping upon it with all his weight, he held it down, while he quickly made the rope fast.

He could now look at the stallion's neck and see where he had hit him. The hole was a trifle low. An inch lower would have killed that beautiful wild animal. Hardy shuddered at the thought.

Suddenly thinking of Cyclone, he climbed up on a nearby boulder and looked down the trail. Yes, there he stood, head down, submissive to the rope,—heartbroken. Climbing down off of the boulder, he started down the little trail, saying aloud to himself: "The poor old devil! I'd ought to turn him loose and let him go—he don't owe me nothin'; but, if I did, I'd be plannin' 'fore night how to catch him again."

All that night it rained, and the sky did not clear until nearly noon the next day. Hardy saddled up after dinner and, packing up his camp outfit, moved back to the spring again. Then he rode out and drove the band of wild horses away several miles. Without their leader they would wander about aimlessly, and in a few days would be picked up by some other band,—adopted into the family of another bold "Knight of the Range".

The wild horse difficulty was over. When Berger returned, they could go ahead with their work. They would run out and post the line, and ride the district alternate days so as to keep informed regarding what was happening. They must begin at once to become acquainted

with the people and explain to them the regulations governing National Forests. As soon as that line was posted Old Mack would expect the enforcement of these regulations as set forth in the "Use Book", and the real work would begin.

The next night about 'dark it began to rain again. Hardy rather enjoyed the change of weather. He built a large camp fire for the sake of comfort, letting the warmth into his tent through the wide open flap, and then sat inside mixing the bread in preparation for supper. He would welcome any incident for a change. Too much sunshine can produce monotony as well as anything else.

Hearing something, he looked out around the corner of the tent. Berger was coming up the little trail whistling, his slicker covering him from the tightly buttoned collar about his neck to the very tips of his toes, shedding every drop of rain. He was in the dry and evidently enjoying the weather too,—or perhaps just whistling to keep his spirits up, glad he had at last arrived safely at camp. Hardy saw that there was a pack on Buck, and as they came a little closer he noticed something else which explained why the pack had looked so large. Sticking out from under the "tarp" was the foot of a deer; and, as his horse turned, the antlers too came into view.

Berger was noticing things also. Cyclone, hobbled and side lined, was grazing peacefully with the other saddle horses. And the stallion, with brand burned deep on his shoulder, was standing securely tied to a tree back of the camp. Hardy had been busy and had fulfilled his part of the contract. Berger was filled with unbounded admiration.

His first question as he rode up was: "How did you ever manage to catch those horses, Hardy?"

All the information he received was: "Oh, after you boys left, I went out and brought 'em in. But to be honest, kid, it was just pure, unadulterated luck. Unpack that venison, quick! I want a steak for supper. Glad to see you back; it's most awful lonesome hangin' 'round camp alone."

While eating supper Berger told of his experiences: "It began to snow in the mountains the night after we left. The next morning, although the storm was continually becoming worse, Brewster suggested that we go over the ridge and get a deer, as there was just enough snow to trail them nicely. This was easily accomplished, and we spent the balance of the day sitting around the fire talking. Towards night the wind began to blow. The next morning it cleared and I started home, but before noon it was storming again harder than ever. The storm was blinding, and the trails were all drifted over with snow, so the only natural thing to do was to get lost.

"However, I did manage to get down out of the mountains, and late that night came to a Mexican house and inquired the way. The Mexicans urged me to stay over night and I accepted. They gave me the best they had—'chili con carne y frijoles' of course, and goat's milk and cheese, tortillas and coffee. They are very curious to know what the Government is going to do. They haven't any conception of what a National Forest is, and are under the impression that the Government intends to drive them from their homes and make this country into a game preserve, or something of that kind.

"When I explained to them that they could homestead the farming land and be allowed to graze ten head of milk cows or thirty head of goats free on the Government land adjoining, and graze larger herds by paying a small grazing fee, they were quite relieved. The trouble with these people is their ignorance. When they understand what we are trying to do, I think they will stop opposing us. They are the most hospitable people in the world. They treated me fine, and in the morning I gave them a piece of venison, which seemed to please them immensely."

Hardy drawled jokingly: "From a remark or two Brewster made after you got in from the baile that morning, I reckoned you thought some of 'em were most awful nice."

Berger laughed good naturedly, as he replied: "I suppose Brewster spoke for himself also."

"Who shot this buck, kid?"

"I will have to confess that I did, Hardy. I can't claim any credit for it from a sportsman's point of view, though; it was just like going out and shooting an animal out of our range herd. Brewster insisted that I should take the lead as soon as we struck their trail, and we came over a ridge, and there they were, not two hundred yards away,—a standing shot. Brewster waited until he saw mine drop and took his on the bound. Hit his mark too, but it took a second shot to stop him. I'd surely like to go there some time this winter and hunt mountain lions with Brewster. He has a dandy pack of hounds, and the finest string of saddle horses I ever saw. The one he rode over here is not his best by any means."

After deliberating a few minutes, Hardy replied: "I don't see why you can't go, kid, when we get a little better line on things here. Killin' them predatory animals is right in line with our work."

"I'd surely love to! Brewster says the lions are preying on the colts, and even yearlings and two-year-olds. He has lost several himself, and so have others."

"You can plan on it, kid."

They had eaten their supper inside the tent. The rain was now turning to snow and falling fast. After the dishes were washed and put away, Hardy filled his pipe as usual and settled back on his bed roll, absorbed in thought. Berger had long since learned not to molest him when in this mood, and his thoughts drifted back home. It was really the first chance he had had since before the election to think much about anything except the events in which he had been participating, and which had been following one another in such rapid succession.

It suddenly occurred to him that it was Friday night; that the mail would go out from the post-office early in the morning; and that he had no letters written,—in fact, he had not answered the ones he had received the week before when at the election. To-morrow would be the second weekly outgoing mail without a letter in it from

him. He wondered what his mother and his sweetheart, Elaine, would think—and his old friends too. He owed them all letters and apologies.

Going in and out of the tent, he had tracked considerable mud in upon the canvas floor. Darkness was coming on. The fire had burned down; and it was chilly too. It would soon be pitch dark. No wonder the boy's mind drifted home.

As he thought of his mother, he was filled with a feeling of remorse for having so neglected to write to her. She would worry about him, though he had no fear of her losing faith in him. He knew she would answer his next letter just as promptly and lovingly as ever.

But with Elaine it was quite different. He was almost afraid to write to her now. She might not answer. Such neglect on his part might not be tolerated. He wished he could see her and explain it all to her. Perhaps he could make up; but he did not know what to write. The more he thought, the worse was his predicament. Finally he decided to write only to his mother that evening.

The next mail after to-morrow would not go for a week, and before that time he would compose a letter to Elaine, but he would to-night write to "Mama", even though it was too late to get it into this week's mail. He could tell her how sorry he was that he had neglected her; how busy he had been; and that he was all right. She would understand. He went out and piled the wood high on the fire, so that it would make light and warmth in the tent, and then began to write.

When he had finished and addressed the envelope, Hardy asked in a kindly tone: "Writin' to your old mother, kid?"

"Yes," Berger confessed, "I'm ashamed too, because I didn't write last week and the mail goes to-morrow. This letter will not go till next week."

Hardy sat and looked into the fire for a long time. He was thinking about Berger's old mother over the mountain, looking for the letter that did not come last week, and would not come this week. Finally he took his pipe

from his mouth, and, with the most serious expression on his face that Berger had ever seen, said: "Don't never let it happen again, kid." Then after a long pause, during which he did not once turn his honest gaze from Berger's face, he continued: "A man don't have but one mother."

He could not find words to express himself further. Slowly turning his gaze to the camp fire, he stared into it as he so often did when absorbed in deep thought. Sitting there,—his pipe held unconsciously in his hand, entirely forgotten, until the fire slowly burned out of it,—Hardy presented a character which even the unsophisticated boy could not help but respect. He had never seen him quite so absorbed in thought.

In the flames of the camp fire Hardy was seeing visions. He saw himself as he parted from his mother when but a youngster. He saw the expression of that mother love on her face as distinctly as though it had been but yesterday. At the time he had thought little of it. He had wanted to see the world, and he had gone to sea and had visited many lands. He had seen the good and the bad. It was a wild, rough life; he had traveled the whole route. He had visited the dives and hell-holes of the world. In various lands he had seen the worst of life, but with his keen observation he had also seen much of love.

Wild and reckless as he had been, he had not failed to observe causes and effects, for he was naturally a thinking man. Even in his wildest days he had formed conclusions from his observations, and had become firmly convinced that a mother's love was the only love that was pure. Family life he recognized as the backbone of a nation, its quality being the standard by which to rate the people; but in the end it reverted back to a mother's love as the one thing,—the indefinable, indispensable element that makes possible family life. It was the foundation of civilization and its institutions—the one thing greater than laws or creeds that stood between civilization and barbarism.

These convictions he had never expressed in words, but he could see them visualized as he gazed into the camp fire; and, as he looked, he thought of how careless he had been about writing to his mother. She had never forgotten to write to him. Many times her letters never reached him; many more times they never received a reply. The one thing he regretted most in all his wild life was his neglect of her. One morning as he was recovering from a drunken spree, he had received the belated message of her death and last message to him. That message had called him home. That true mother love had followed him around the world and had at last made a better man of him.

Could he speak of these things to the "kid"? Could he express himself? No! Mother love was too sacred—too deep a subject for him to try to discuss with the kid. He was not fit to do it. He would say no more.

It was hardly fitting for him, an old bachelor, to eulogize family life. But, even though he was not himself the head of a family, perhaps he could help blaze a trail into this undeveloped country, help to make conditions such that better men than he might follow and rear families that would be a credit to the nation and to civilization. Thus ran his thoughts.

And in the flames of the camp fire appeared to him a vision of Ranger District Number Five—a vision of homes scattered through the mountain valleys, self-supporting families, dependent only upon their industry and thrift in caring for their little flocks, making proper use of the natural resources at hand, subservient to no one except the Nation of which they were a part and which guided and protected them.

Perhaps under this new regime it would be the poor downtrodden peons who would rise from the slough of despair to independence. He saw the waters of the rivers stored in large reservoirs, irrigating the fertile lands on the plains; sawmills in the forests harvesting the ripe timber and converting it to the use of man to build houses,

schools, churches, cities; everything that goes with the advance of civilization directed by an intelligent Christian people. Possibly he could help a little to bring this about. He had not thought much about this phase of it before,—he was there only because Old Mack had sent him and said he could not spare him.

The camp fire had burned low and the chill of the damp night air was making itself felt inside the tent when Hardy discovered his burned-out pipe reposing in his hand. Dumping out the ashes and half burned tobacco, he slowly refilled and lighted it, and as slowly arose and stepped out into the open. The sky had cleared.

His thoughts had returned to Berger and the letter he had written to his mother, which would not be mailed for a week. Coming back into the tent, he rolled out his bed, pulled off his boots, and, removing his outer clothing rolled into his blankets, remarking casually to Berger, who still sat looking at the embers: "Looks like clear weather again.—About writin' letters, I've been a thinkin' you'd better make a complete report of what we know about this district, and we will get it into the mail next week. Old Mack will be expectin' somethin' like o' that. Eh, kid?"

Berger answered in his usual respectful tone whenever any suggestions were made by Hardy about the work: "Yes, sir; I will begin it to-morrow evening."

"You might as well use daylight for it, kid, and when you are fresh,—in the morning. You've had a hard ride in the storm; work at it to-morrow. Good-night."

Berger bade him good-night, banked the fire, and retired to his own tent. The coyotes howled in their conventional story book "chorus"—probably only two, but sounding like a dozen.

Neither of the men went to sleep immediately. Each was thinking—Berger about what he would tell Elaine, Hardy about Berger's old mother anxiously waiting for that letter from her son. But finally the sound of heavy

breathing issuing from Berger's tent indicated that sleep had overpowered his worries.

Hardy looked at his watch, then at the sky, saying to himself: "Twelve thirty, clear as a bell; mail leaves at seven, I can make it easy. It will save her another week's worry, an' won't hurt me a bit."

Pulling on his pants and boots, then his chaps, adjusting his spurs, and slipping on his coat and hat, were accomplished in short order. He was excited. There was the same thrill as though going out on a lark. Of course the old lady would never know about his night ride to mail her boy's letter to her, but her joy at receiving it would be reward enough for him.

"Reckon I'd better leave the kid a note," he said to himself. So, taking his diary from his pocket, he sat down on the bed. He did not want Berger to think that he was making the trip purposely to mail that letter to his mother. What would he make as an excuse? Then he remembered that it was the week their service diaries should be mailed in to the Supervisor's office. Strange he had not thought of that before. Time had been fleeting swiftly by for him also. Of course the diaries could wait another week, but it was sufficient excuse anyway, so he wrote: "Gone to post-office with mail—Hardy."

Taking the leaves of the last two weeks of their diaries and putting them in an envelope, he addressed it to the Forest Supervisor. Then, slipping the letter from Berger's carrying case, he crept cautiously out of his tent and past Berger's. He was still sleeping heavily.

A few minutes later Hardy was astride "Baldie" and climbing the little trail up the rim rock.

At break of day Berger awoke as usual. He wondered a little that Hardy was not already out starting the fire. Going to his tent, he noticed the note pinned to the tent flap with a split stick.

Hardy had purposely dropped the loose leaf diary books on the floor of the tent. Berger noticed them. So this

was why Hardy had gone with the mail! He had thought of the diaries. He wished he had known that Hardy was going. He would have sent at least a note to Elaine; but it was too late now.

Not until then did he think of the letter to his mother, and he looked into his carrying case to see if it had been taken. Yes, Hardy had remembered to take it. If he had written a letter to Elaine, it would have gone also. He felt guilty, remorseful, homesick.

Not waiting to build a fire, he threw the saddle upon "Shorty," and they climbed the little trail up the rim rock. He did not know where he was going or what he would do. His mind was far away, and he instinctively wanted to get up out of that hole where he could look toward home. Once on top, the sight that greeted his eyes was not comforting. The mountains in the distance were covered with snow. Berger knew what that meant; there would be no trail over the high passes until this snow thawed in the spring. There was snow in the mountains when he left them the day before, but he had not then thought of them as an insurmountable barrier between him and his home, his mother, and his sweetheart on the other side.

He was just plain homesick now—the sick kind of homesick. He did not want any breakfast, and he did not feel as if he would ever want to eat again. The lion hunt and the bailes which he and Brewster had planned to attend during the coming winter did not arouse pleasant anticipation this morning. All he could think of was a dreary existence in camp through the long winter months—routine monotony. Even Hardy was becoming tiresome to him. He had heard all of his tales. There would be nothing new all winter. If he could only go home for a visit, he could then come back and stick it out. But that was out of the question.

He dismounted, lay down on the ground, and cried like the great, big, overgrown boy that he was. After he had his cry nearly out and began to feel better and think

things out more rationally, he said aloud, between blubbers: "No wonder Hardy calls me a kid. He'd ought to call me a baby. That's all I am."

He stood and looked long at the snow capped range. Then, slowly remounting, he turned his horse around in the trail. His resolve had been made. He would go back and stick it out,—be a man. After breakfast he must get busy on that report to the Supervisor.

CHAPTER X

"STRYCHNINE IS RIGHT PALATABLE"

In the Forest Supervisor's office sat Old Mack, looking over the official mail and dictating letters to his stenographer.

On the opposite side of the little mountain stream, which ran within a stone's throw of his office, was a little logging railroad. The sawmill which this railroad served was down the cañon a half mile or more. The mill town extended both above and below, and on either side of the narrow cañon rose the forest covered mountains.

It had been a long, hard winter, but now the snow was melting from the mountain sides and was being replaced by green grass and wild flowers. These seemed to spring up over night at the very edge of the melting snow and ice. The pussy willows had long since burst forth, and the oak and quaking aspen were leafing out. There would be huge banks of snow on the higher peaks until midsummer, but even now the range was becoming green in the foothills. The cattle and sheep were again entering the Forest—the summer grazing season had begun.

Old Mack had not yet been out over the Forest this spring. How he longed to get away from the office! He would start, too, just as soon as he could, but right now there were so many important matters demanding his attention that it seemed impossible to leave.

He was as familiar with the general conditions of the Forest as if he had been riding every day, although the area over which he had jurisdiction was equal to that of a couple of Eastern States. He had punched cattle, herded sheep, hewn railroad ties, cut saw logs, prospected for copper in that region, not to mention his service in the various capacities of Deputy Sheriff, Mounted Police, and Forest Ranger for years before he had become Forest

Supervisor. It was this practical knowledge of the country, its industries and people, that had fitted Old Mack to preside in that office and supervise the work of his field men. Oh, yes! Old Mack had been to college,—the little log cabin college in the back woods district—just seven days to be exact. Perhaps this schooling laid the foundation for his education; but, be that as it may, Old Mack was an educated man. He had learned to read and write both English and Spanish through his own efforts,—and was well read.

But the books he loved and studied most were the mountains, valleys, rivers, plains, and all that pertained to them. He knew the habits of the wild game, of the cattle and the sheep. The people,—Indians, white men, Mexicans, whether peon or patron, cow puncher or cow thief,—Old Mack knew them all and their ways. Some of his knowledge might have been hard to obtain from written books; but why study presentations when actualities are at hand! Old Mack was a close student of actualities.

In the little wire basket on the table before him were many unanswered letters, reports of all kinds,—grave problems for his consideration. There were the grazing permits awaiting his approval, the reports from the timber sales, the fire patrol plan and appointment of the season's forest guards, the permanent improvement work to outline, and crew to organize to carry out the work. The experimental planting station must be established, and the timber reconnaissance begun.

But he felt and knew that his presence in the field was needed at this time to obtain the best results from his men. He was not an office man, and besides there were many matters that could not be properly settled from the office. Some of the best men made very poor reports, and vice versa. The only way to settle controversies was to go into the field himself. Ranger Wright had reported a large timber trespass; a lumber company was complaining of the scale of the forest officer; Ranger Brewster was having trouble with a lumber company cutting timber on

his district; Rangers Blair and Dennis were having a personal quarrel. These were only a few of the perplexing problems which confronted Old Mack and demanded his personal attention.

From Ranger District Number Five came the report that Ortega absolutely refused to make application for permit to graze his cattle and sheep within the Forest; that he also prevented smaller owners who were willing to comply with the regulations from doing so,—that, in fact, he defied the authority of the Forest Service in every way, contending that that part of the Forest would soon be eliminated. He was very polite in his conversation, but his stand was firm—no Forest Ranger could run his business for him.

On Old Mack's desk lay several complaints signed by a long list of residents of Ranger District Number Five, setting forth in detail many charges against the conduct of the rangers in that part of the Forest. These complaints were aimed at Hardy, Brewster and Berger, and had been submitted not to the Forest Supervisor, but to his superiors and to Congressmen, and had come down to him.

The petition submitted by Ortega and others for the elimination of part of the Forest was also bearing fruit. The correspondence strongly indicated that a Congressional investigation might be instigated, to ascertain whether or not this change should be made. Powerful political influences were being brought to bear against the National Forest.

Just that morning Old Mack had received a letter stating that so many complaints were continually coming in regarding the administration of the Forest and the flagrant misconduct of the rangers in his charge, that they had greatly embarrassed the Service, and, coming from such high sources, it was believed that the complaints were not unfounded. In short, "where there was so much smoke there must be some fire." He was advised to replace the rangers against whom so many complaints were being made. There was a thinly concealed hint

that, if the removal of these rangers did not stop the cause for so many complaints, it might be necessary for the good of the Service to transfer the Supervisor (Old Mack) to another Forest.

As Old Mack looked at the signature to this letter, a sarcastic smile spread over his face, and he commented aloud: "Don't suppose *you* are afraid of losing *your* job? What if *my* removal did not stop the complaints?"

Old Mack knew his rangers were not perfect. He did not doubt but that they had committed indiscretions. They were rough men in a rough country, and at times had plenty to provoke them. He had heard indirectly of the conduct of Casper and Thorne, and of this he could not approve.

But he knew Hardy and Berger and did not believe that they were "officious and quarrelsome". Then he remembered when, as a Mounted Police, he had ridden into that country to investigate a murder, and he thought aloud: "Well! If I were riding over there, I believe I would be 'officious and quarrelsome' enough to protect myself, too, and perhaps put a wholesome fear into the hearts of some of Ortega's cut-throats. If only half is true that's said about him, he has people whom he dislikes put out of his way. Perhaps the boys carry it a little too far; but one thing is certain, they are doing good work over there; those maps and reports of Berger's are a credit to any ranger."

The real cause of these complaints was plain enough. If Old Ortega would comply with the Forest Service regulations and quit "bucking" the Service, the one great cause would be removed. To remove the present rangers would not stop the trouble; it would only weaken the Service and play into Ortega's hand. The rangers he had in the field were just becoming familiar enough with conditions to begin to render really efficient service. New men would be practically useless for a time.

He was certain in his own mind, as he looked over the long list of names on the complaints, that many of the

signers knew not what they had signed, but had done so because of Ortega's instructions.

As to the politicians and patrons petitioning in the name of the common people for the elimination of the Forest, these men had "axes to grind". They had builded kingdoms of their own through the free use of the public lands and all that pertained to them,—timber, cattle, horses, sheep,—everything that was produced or lived thereon, even the poor people were theirs. No wonder they objected to paying tribute to Uncle Sam—to taking orders from his officers; their kingdoms were tottering.

But they represented power, not only there on the ground, but in Washington,—the capital of the Nation. They were actualities and must be dealt with as such.

Old Mack threw the papers down and leaned back in his chair. That little smile which was always present when he had a fight on hand broadened until it was nearly a grin, and half aloud he said: "Fire my men to hush the noise, eh? . . . No! As long as I am in this office, I'll enforce the regulations, if I have to fight above and below. I'll show that there are two sides to this controversy. I guess when those fellows in the Washington office know the whole truth, they will stand back of me. Anyway, I'll bring everything and everybody out into the light and make them fight in the open. Lose my job! Get transferred! Hell!"

He called his stenographer and dictated a letter to his superior, requesting that a complete and thorough investigation be made on the ground by a representative from the office regarding the charges against his rangers, stating that to his knowledge there were many extenuating circumstances to mitigate the offenses, if not entirely refute the charges.

Then he dictated a letter to Ranger Hardy, ordering him to round up all the trespass cattle on his district and count them; also to make a count of all sheep in trespass, and submit a complete report at the earliest possible date. He stated that the rangers on the districts

adjoining would be requested to assist him with the roundup, that they would report to him on the twentieth of the month, and would be under his direct orders until the roundup was completed, or such time as he could dispense with their services. A copy of this letter was to be mailed to each of the rangers affected by this order, and also to Ortega, to be posted in a conspicuous place in the post-office, in order that all stock owners might know.

Calling in his deputy from the outer office, he went over the more important matters which would demand attention, and placed him in charge, stating that in the morning he would start on a field trip and might be gone a month. Before he returned he intended to know what was going on in the field among his rangers.

Old Mack was beginning to take action.

The next morning saw Old Mack up fully two hours earlier than usual, saddling and packing. Taking a complete outfit such as he used when a ranger, he rode out and up the little road through the pines. He felt like a man who had just been released from prison. How good it seemed to get out of that stuffy old office into the pure ozone laden air of the woods again, and in the saddle! Old Keeno had tried to throw him that morning, but he had now gotten the "hump" out of his back and was settling down to his old time long distance gait. The horses had been in too long—and they were soft; but a few days in the open with camp fare would put both man and beast in condition again.

As Old Mack rode along, his mind soon turned to the purpose of his trip. First he would investigate the timber "steal". If Ranger Wright had been guilty of "selling privileges", he would find it out, and not only see that he was "fired" and punished to the full extent provided by law for such "graft", but he would have the satisfaction of giving him a good beating. There was something wrong; and Old Mack intended to go to the bottom of

it,—he could tolerate any kind of incompetence better than dishonesty.

Then he would go to the other sawmills and investigate their troubles; and on to the Experiment Station site where the reconnaissance crew would be camped. By the time he had investigated all these matters on the east side of the mountains, Hardy's roundup would be completed, and he would ride over there, and constitute another witness in the trespass case. That would be soon enough to investigate the conduct of those rangers. Besides, he did not consider the complaints of sufficient importance to interfere with the roundup. He would not question those men or interfere with their work in any way until after the roundup was accomplished. Possibly he was prejudiced, but he confessed to himself that his sympathy was with his men. When Ortega showed a disposition to comply with the regulations, it would be time to give serious consideration to his criticism of the Forest officers. The troubles of District Number Five would soon be aired in the Federal Court—if his plan carried; and justice would be meted out to all parties concerned.

As he passed up the cañon, he saw the Mexican tie haulers bringing in the hewn railroad ties from the woods and piling them along the track. The section hands were busy at their tiresome task. Farther up the cañon the log loaders were piling the saw logs high on the cars. The teamsters were making the woods ring with their imperative commands to the big logging horses, which worked with a trained intelligence such as would have excited the admiration of any true lover of animals. The "skidders" were shouting and swinging their long lashed whips at their teams of four yoke of sleek oxen. The sawyers and axmen, felling the trees and cutting them into logs, added a music which was familiar and pleasant to Old Mack's ears. In fact Old Mack liked all of these activities and scenes.

As he passed the crews of workmen, they greeted him. It was "Hello, Mack!" "How are ye, Mack?" "Goin'

out into the woods, Mack?" And he returned the greeting, calling many by name.

At the end of the logging railroad he took dinner in the cook shack. There also he met the Forest Assistant in charge of the timber cutting, and went over the work with him briefly before setting out again. About mid-afternoon he came to the end of the wagon road, and turned in to a little trail which led up and over the first range of mountains. In the valley on the other side the lumber company with which he would have important business was operating.

Just as he was making camp at dusk, two men—a white man and a Mexican—came riding down the little trail. The plodding gait of their saddle and pack animals indicated plainly that they had traveled a long distance.

They rode straight up to the camp and the American spoke: "Hello, Mack! How are ye?"

"Not so worse, Blair. How are you?"

"Just tolerable, Mack, just tolerable. But I 'spect to pull through. 'Course ye hearn 'bout the nigger what said that he'd allus observed dat, if he got through de wintah, he'd lib 'nudder yeah."

Blair had leisurely dismounted, and the two men were shaking hands. As Old Mack looked at Blair's perfect physique and felt the firm grip of his hand, he laughed at Blair's attempt at wit and remarked: "The nigger's observations are correct as applied to your case I am sure. Unslung your pack and make yourself at home."

Old Mack turned again to the preparation of supper, and by the time the visitors had their horses taken care of it was well under way.

As Blair came up to camp after caring for his horses, his face and hands dripping with the cold mountain water from the little creek in which he had just performed a necessary ablution, preparatory to the attack which he would soon make upon the evening meal, he commented: "Why, Mack, ye've been hibernatin' right smart, hain't ye? Haven't hearn o' ye're bein' out o' the office for a dog's age. 'Pears like ye're gettin' to like the cushions o' them thar swivel chairs. Never'd a thought it o' ye,

Mack." Then, after another swipe of the towel across his cheery red face, he continued reflectively: "But I hain't blamin' ye; ye've done right smart ridin' fer a span o' years, an' are deservin' o' a little windin' spell."

"Hibernating is right, Blair; being in an office is the next thing to being dead. But come! Give an account of yourself. What are you doing with this 'compadre' of yours here?"

"Oh! Pardon me, Mack. I done forgot. Ought to hev explained. He's my prisoner. I'm takin' 'im before the bars o' justice. Thar's the ornary'st gang o' outlaws over thar on my District that a white man ever hit up agin. They're jest meaner 'an pisin; strychnine is right palatable compared with some o' them thar degenerated hambres. An' I have been tryin' to educate some o' them to be human bein's. This particular individual here acquired a very obnoxious habit o' tearin' down them thar cloth notices that I had so laboriously tacked onto the trees . . . an' I caught 'im right in the act o' tearin' down one o' them thar boundary notices that Berger had posted up on the east line o' my District . . . an' so I thought I'd make an object lesson o' 'im, an' brought 'im along to turn over to the authorities."

By this time Blair was busily engaged in the process of storing away bacon, biscuits, and hot coffee, and his speech was rather disjointed. Old Mack waited until Blair's mastication admitted of the issuance of further explanation, and the conversation continued intermittently:

"Now, Mack, don't misunderstand me. I'm not knockin' the whole population. Jest this low down murderous outfit o' cow thieves an' malignant malefactors. The common run o' 'henty' over thar ain't so ornary. Some o' them are right clever hambres. Now ol' Antonio Gonzalez, he's as honorable an ol' Spaniard as I ever met up with—a white man through and through. He's the big chunk over thar,—the Patron,—an' he sure is good to his peons. His ol' dad used ter handle his peons with an iron hand, an' made a fortune off 'em. When he died,

he left Don Antonio just thousands o' cattle an' sheep, but he's lettin' his peons get away with 'em. Gives 'em all the stock they want on shares, an' they barter it away to the Indians an' lose it all one way or another. If they can't pay up at the store, Don Antonio jest extends 'em more credit. Consequently they are gettin' so they don't have any respect fer him, an' it's a makin' some of 'em right ornary.

"Ye know, the only way to handle them thar ignorant greasers is jest to be meaner 'an pisin to 'em, an' have 'em scared plumb to death o' ye. If ye'd kill one once in a while like ol' Diaz does down in ol' Mexico, then they are right agreeable company an' right pert workers. But, if ye use 'em kind o' decent like, they jest quit workin' an' split up into gangs an' go about robbin' an' murderin' each other like any other ignorant savages."

Mack took advantage of a slight pause on Blair's part to remark: "Yes, I've noticed that the genuine old peonage system seems to be a very practical method of handling Mexicans. Their nature seems to demand it. Then sometimes I wonder if the peonage system has not made them what they are."

"But," Blair continued, "what I was gettin' at, Mack, is that Don Antonio is lettin' 'em get the upper hand to such an extent that it wouldn't surprise me if they'd kill 'im off some o' these days. Thar's two or three fellers kind o' on the order o' them thar insurrecto leaders down thar in ol' Mexico that envy Don Antonio his position.

"This here feller I got is the leader o' one o' them thar bands down on the north end o' my district next to Hardy's, an' I wouldn't be at all surprised if he's one o' Ol' Ortega's henchmen. Don Antonio thinks he 'as his whole gang out workin' for Ortega an' I wouldn't doubt it a bit. Ye see, Don Antonio's ol' dad had Ortega plumb scared o' 'im, an' long as he was alive Ortega kep' out o' that country over thar. In fact, he an' ol' man Gonzalez—Don Antonio's dad—agreed upon a line between 'em. An' Ol' Ortega was always faithful with

the ol' man 'cause he daresn't be otherwise. But since the ol' man died a year ago, things have changed. Don Antonio is a man o' principles, an' he don't like Ol' Ortega, but he's scared to death of 'im.

"So ye see, under them thar circumstances, it would be no use talkin' to this here feller or takin' 'im before a justice o' the peace over in that country. Up in Don Antonio's end o' it they'd be afeared to do anything, an' down in Ortega's end they wouldn't do nothin' nohow. So I thought I'd jest give 'im a little trip across the mountain, an' get 'im before an impartial court. One thing I'm positive of, an' that is, if some o' them thar ornary, thievin', malicious hombres are not edified by a higher education along the line o' personal conduct, we won't be able to keep a line posted in that whole country.

"'Course it 'pears like a petty offense,—tearin' down one o' them thar notices, an' no doubt the court will consider it so; but it is right aggravatin' to a feller that's a postin' 'em up; an' the law is plain enough. 'Pears to me that, if we let 'em get away with them so-called petty offenses, they will jest get bolder an' plumb lose all their respect fer their Uncle Sam. 'Course, all o' the respect they know fer anything is fear."

Blair had now completed his supper as well as his charges against the prisoner, and the explanation of his own action in the matter, and settled back, lighting his pipe. The Mexican, who understood no more of this conversation than if it had been carried on in Greek, rolled out his blanket and went to bed, while Old Mack and Blair sat before the camp fire and talked.

After discussing a number of different topics, Mack asked: "How are Hardy and Berger getting along, Blair? Do you ever hear or see anything of them?"

"Tolerable, Mack, tolerable. I met up with 'em when they was a runnin' out that west line up on my end. That thar Berger is sure a powerful cuss. Me an' him worked together brushin' out the line fer a week, or sech a matter. Cedar an' piñon thick as hair on a dog,

an' the way that cuss swung an ax was a caution,—jest mowed right through. Didn't seem to know enough to get tired or quit. Right pert feller, too.

"An' that man Hardy is a right clever feller. Most particular person I about ever seen. You kin depend on it that he'll run that thar line correct. Sure did make him get on the prod when them thar ornary outlaws would tear down them thar notices they was a postin' along the line. 'Spect he made one or two of 'em mighty sorry an' repentant fer their indiscretions. Now, if I'd start man-handlin' them thar desperadoes accordin' to Hardy's methods, I'd get licked so often my self-respect would plumb leave me—'specially down thar in Hardy's country. There are some right mean ornary hombres down that way. Been a right smart lot o' murderin' goin' on thar this winter.

"Along last fall sometime it appears an' ol' prospector come in thar with a complete outfit. An' after he'd opened up a hole in the rocks up in Martinez Cañon somewhar an' got out some specimens o' ore what he thought were right rich in copper or somethin', he come up missin'.

"'Pears also that thar was an ol' farmer what had been settled over thar fer a year or so; was quite chummy with this here ol' prospector, an' not seein' him go by after supplies fer a month or so, he went up an' made an investigation around about his camp. He found his burros down in the cañon. But the ol' prospector was gone an' all his chuck an' beddin' an' everything. After a while the ol' farmer dug around in the dump o' the prospect hole an' found his body—had been hit in the head with a minin' pick.

"Well, then the ol' farmer went blowin' around an' noisin' it all about as to what he'd found, an' was a goin' to report it to the Secret Service an' so on, an' about that time he come up missin' himself. Hain't never been found yet. Tom Cady—the Deputy Sheriff—claimed to have taken the ol' farmer's watch off'n a hombre who was a spendin' money over his bar in rather too lavish a man-

ner, considerin' his normal station in life, an' claimed to have discovered some evidence that this here hombre assassinated the farmer an' the prospector. But it's hard to tell. No white man's ever had any luck tryin' to locate down in that thar country. Most o' the men think that Ol' Ortega has had right smart to do with them thar dirty deals.

"This here peon that Cady claimed had done the killing is one o' that thar Martinez family that Ol' Ortega's got it in fer. You know there's ben bad blood atwixt the Martinezes and Ortegas fer a century or more. Hardy says it wouldn't surprise him a bit if Tom Cady didn't do all the killin' himself, an' that that was the way he got possession o' the watch he claimed to have taken off'n this here Martinez he said was a spendin' money so superfluously over his bar. You know Cady's not only the Deputy Sheriff, but also enjoys the most questionable distinction o' bein' manager or proprietor o' that thar joint o' ill fame down thar. An' beside all these important occupations, he always drives Ol' Ortega around an' acts as sort o' bodyguard—got the country plumb buffaloed.

"Hardy and Berger hain't got no snap afore 'em, straightenin' things out on that thar district. Anyone what envies 'em their job ain't got right good sense. Hardy won't say nothin' about it—jest laughs at there bein' any danger; allows they jest ain't got the nerve to start anything with Uncle Sam. He says Ol' Ortega's got too much sense fer that. Now maybe that's what's pertectin' him an' Berger. Ortega may have them thar peons o' hisn instructed an' educated not to start anything with their Uncle Samuel. One thing is right certain: Ol' Ortega has full an' complete control o' his little country down thar, an' anything what happens or doesn't happen, it's a right good guess that he's responsible fer it."

Old Mack sat in silence through the whole account; but, after Blair finished, he scraped back the coals of the

dying camp fire and painstakingly buried the bean pail with live coals beneath and on top, remarking, as he finished: "These frijoles will make a good filler for your prisoner in the morning."

Then as he began rolling out his bed, he changed the subject abruptly: "There's one thing I want to speak to you about, Blair, and that is your quarrel with Dennis. You know that sort of thing won't do."

"Why, Mack, ye wouldn't 'spect me to let the poor, locoed four flusher jest ride up an' plug me, would ye?"

Here Old Mack interrupted what would have been a prolonged discussion on Blair's part: "No, nor I wouldn't expect you to plug him. And that's what will happen if the quarreling continues. You can avoid gun play if you try, and that is what I want you to do—in the interest of the Service."

The tone in which the last sentence had been pronounced put a new light on the matter; and, as Blair's gaze met Old Mack's earnest expression, he could plainly see that this was not a personal matter with Old Mack, but a plain duty in the interest of the Service, and he replied simply and sincerely: "I'll do my best."

CHAPTER XI

THE WARNING

A few days after Old Mack and Blair had had their chance meeting and camp fire chat, a man rode along a little trail through the cedar, piñon, scrub oak, and sage in the thinly forested foothills of Ranger District Number Five. It was toward evening. The mud was deep, and the horse was tired from traveling through it all day long.

Presently they came to an arroyo, running deep with brown muddy water, or, more properly speaking, watery mud. They paused and surveyed it for a moment, speculating as to their chance of making the crossing safely. This was useless speculation, however, for they must get across in some way, or camp on the muddy bank overnight, without supper, bed, or breakfast.

So the rider spoke to his mount, gently at first and then more sternly, and jabbed him with his spur. After some little persuasive argument of this nature, the weary animal advanced down the narrow trail to the water's edge. A few more jabs with the spur, a lashing with the double rope, an imperative command, and they had taken the plunge. The water was only leg deep, but the current was swifter than it had looked. The thick mud was heavy, and the moving sand underneath afforded poor footing. Could they keep from drifting down stream so as to make the landing,—that narrow place where the trail led up the opposite arroyo bank? If they missed it, they would have to drift down the stream between those perpendicular walls of clay until they came to the next break in the wall—perhaps a quarter of a mile below—possibly much farther.

Once in the stream, the horse appreciated the seriousness of the situation as well as did its rider—perhaps

better—and it exerted its utmost strength against the current. Two-thirds of the way across, and the poor tired animal had exhausted its reserve strength. The current was stronger here, and the water deeper. It was a losing struggle—only through a miracle could they possibly make it. The horse made one last super-effort, and failed, and, realizing this, began to drift down the stream.

The water was as cold as ice—it was melted snow and ice from the near-by mountains—and it began to chill the man. He realized that he could not endure it long, and he watched the bank closely as they drifted swiftly down stream. He realized, too, that even drifting with the current, his tired weak horse would not long be able to keep its nose above water with his weight on its back. The arroyo had narrowed and the water was deeper; the horse could no longer touch the bottom and was swimming, barely able to keep its eyes and nose above water.

A short distance, and the arroyo widened again and the banks were broken. There was no trail leading up, but this place would perhaps afford a landing, if he could but turn the horse in towards the bank.

This he tried cautiously, as he knew that to turn a swimming horse abruptly is dangerous—a horse must have its head free to balance itself when swimming. Reining the horse carefully and leaning to one side in the saddle to keep the balance, he tried to head in towards the bank. The horse could not turn much in that current, for it had to keep its head up stream and swim diagonally to keep from going under entirely. Although they were nearly able to touch the bank, the horse was too exhausted to make the final effort which would lead them to safety.

With deep disappointment the man saw that they would miss it by a hair's breadth. There was no telling how far it might be to the next break in the bank, and the horse would probably be completely exhausted before they came to it. The rider did some quick thinking. He

believed he could save himself by quitting the horse. Perhaps then the horse without any load would be able to climb out farther down stream. But it is against the principles of a true range man to quit his horse in time of danger; he must save the horse, and saddle too, if possible. There was no time for lengthy speculation.

Spying a stubby little cedar sapling among the shrubbery on the bank, he acted simultaneously with his thought. The wet rope was hard to throw, but it landed true, catching the little tree securely in the grasp of its loop. A skilled twist and the other end was fastened to the saddle horn. The rope snapped tight in an instant, the force of the current swinging the horse against the bank. At the same instant the rider jumped from the saddle and scrambled up the slippery bank. Once on solid ground, he pulled the horse's head up out of the water by the bridle reins.

Standing there with his feet braced, holding the horse's head above water, he watched him "blow" until he began breathing regularly. In this position the horse was resting. Finally the horse began to try to help himself, and, catching a footing on the sloping bank, crawled up out of the water.

It would have been hard to tell which was the more deplorable sight, the man or the horse. Both were chilled and exhausted, dripping from head to foot with that slimy, slippery mud. It would not do to be long inactive. The man pulled off his coat and began wringing the water from it. Next his muddy sweater came off over his head, smearing his features with the same conglomeration. His hair and beard were long and shaggy, and this act emphasized their unkempt appearance.

Little was the man thinking of his personal appearance, however. Looking closer, an observer—had there been one—would have noticed that his ears, sticking out partially through that shaggy mass of hair and mud, had been blistered, and the old skin was peeling off.

Blistered? No, just frostbitten a few times during the winter, which had caused them to peel off in the manner



"The wet rope was hard to throw, but it landed true, catching the little tree securely in the grasp of its loop."

of sunburn. His nose had passed through the same experience; and now the raw damp winds of spring had chapped his face and cracked his lips. The natural conclusion from all these unmistakable signs was that this animal man had wintered out.

He lay down on the ground and emptied part of the water from his chap pockets and boots, and rolled around in the grass and brush, trying to free himself of as much moisture as possible—all the time keeping up a violent exercise of arms and legs. Then, springing to his feet, he seized some sagebrush and began rubbing down his horse vigorously, going over its muscles and continuing until he himself began to warm up from the exercise. He was restoring himself as well as the horse. So briskly did he work that he finally began to perspire. To work longer would be unwise; he had accomplished his purpose. Both he and the horse were now as fit to travel as they would be.

Stepping to the horse's head he patted it on the neck, unconsciously admiring its beautiful muscles and deep chest. It was thin in flesh and not large, but a glance showed that it was a powerful animal for its size when in condition. The man spoke: "Well, Knight, Old Boy! That was a close call. You did nobly, Old Boy! Think you can make it to camp now?"

The horse rubbed its nose on the man's arm, and as Berger stroked the hair along Knight's neck his hand passed over the old scar,—the place where Hardy had "creased" him when he was really and truly a "Knight of the Range".

Berger's and Hardy's camp was no longer at the little spring under the rim rock. It had not been found practicable to keep it there long. In fact, they had had many camps since, and were now back in one of the little mountain valleys, following up the season's vegetation as did the range stock, where the grass was better for their horses.

Running out that west line some ninety miles through

the wilderness with a Forest Service compass and Jacob's staff, brushing out and posting it, had proven a much greater task than they had anticipated. All kinds of obstacles peculiar to that kind of work had been encountered,—hills and dales, arroyos and desert wastes, rocks and bluffs, timber and brush—at times almost impenetrable mixtures of all these where the plain and the mountains met and gave battle; cold and blizzards, desert and sandstorms, snow and sleet, rain and mud, sunshine and sorrow, duties and orders, adventure and monotony, mirth and anger,—and combinations of all of these,—there on the borderland along the line that Uncle Sam had directed be run out and posted.

They had seen but few white men during the winter. The only one who visited that part of the country regularly was the Catholic priest, who came each month and held services in the little adobe church. However, they had not attended these meetings.

There had been times during the winter when the too intimate association of these two men had become irksome to one or both,—times when they watched each other with looks of contempt, noting the disagreeable little habits and characteristics,—each trying to outdo and exhaust the other. One day they did not eat together, each preparing his meal silently and sullenly, and partaking of it alone. Though they could not help having those moods occasionally, at no time did they openly quarrel or fight, and, had danger threatened at any time, they would have fought to their last ounce of blood for each other. Underneath all, in the heart of each, was a deep respect for the other. Neither ever shirked his tasks; neither wished the other harm. And, as the test of time progressed, the inward feeling of true fellowship and friendship grew in their hearts.

If the tension of that long winter's work and the nervous strain of that unnatural condition—two men living alone in camp together, remote from other human beings of their kind—had been removed by any cause whatever,—whether by recreation or separation,—these

men would have stood proud of each other's friendship, tried and true.

Hardy had come in at dusk as usual, prepared and eaten supper alone, and was engaged in braiding a new lariat from rawhide thongs when Berger arrived at the camp. Berger pulled off his saddle and threw it and the blankets near the camp fire, where they would dry out during the night.

As he stepped into the light Hardy noticed that his clothing was frozen stiff with mud, and sprang to his feet, saying: "I'll take care of your hoss, kid."

Snatching up a horse blanket which they had made from burlap corn sacks, he put it on Knight and removed his bridle. Knight stood still in his tracks, dropping his head to sleep,—too tired even to be interested in eating.

Berger was busy disrobing. He pulled off his chaps, boots, coat, sweater, vest, and did not stop until he had removed the last stitch. Seizing a towel, he rubbed himself briskly and warmed himself over the fire until his body was dry and aglow with the circulation of his rich young blood. Then he ran in on the lion skins that carpeted the floor of his tent to put on a new outfit.

Presently he came out partially dressed and remarked: "That's what I call an enforced bath," and, looking down at his new clothes, which were as torn and ragged as the ones he had taken off, he added laughingly, "All dressed up and no place to go. I tell you, Hardy, if clothes make the man, I am worth about six bits."

"Me and you both, kid, or 'yo tambien' as the greasers say. There's mutton and beans in the pot, and hot bread in the oven. Clothe your innards with 'em."

Berger did not need a second invitation and was soon following Hardy's directions. Hardy sat silently watching him and smoking. His personal appearance was worse even than Berger's, for his clothes were torn and ragged and covered with mud.

At holiday time Berger had had his lion hunt with Brewster and had attended a few Mexican bailes,—the

adventurous, riotous revelry of these affairs having far exceeded the election celebration. They had also attended one white dance in the little sawmill settlement on the other side of Brewster's district. This event had called forth that long lost and hidden suit and white shirt and collar from the folds of the blankets in Berger's bed, and caused them to be pressed with Brewster's irons at his station. Since that event there had been no occasion to dress up.

During Berger's absence Hardy had attended a Mexican wedding and the fiesta and baile, inseparable from such an occasion. He had been treated as a guest of honor; had danced with the bride, also her mother as courtesy demanded, and had thoroughly enjoyed the event. Since then there had been no occasion which seemed to justify the use of a razor, and he had paid no attention to his personal appearance.

Not only their clothing, but their bedding, tents, and equipment in general showed signs of hard usage,—the wear, tear, smoke, ashes, grease, and grime of camp,—too close association with the elements of nature and mother earth, not the least persistent of which is mud. In fact, these men had slipped into a "natural" existence which would have satisfied the most jealous "back to nature" enthusiast.

The lion skins in Berger's tent were, of course, trophies of his hunt. In this respect, however, he had hardly outdone Hardy, who had killed a huge grey timber wolf and now used its skin to carpet his tent. During the winter they had also shot a number of coyotes and bobcats, and a part of these skins, together with some sheep and goat pelts which they had bought, constituted the rugs about the camp.

Berger was now squatting on one of the rugs, Indian fashion, and Hardy was lounging on another. Neither had sat in a chair for months, nor thought of such a luxury. Hardy had seen one when in Ortega's office, when he had entered to order Ortega to remove the il-

legal fence around his big pasture, but he had not sat in it.

Hardy and Berger consumed unbelievable quantities of meat that winter,—not only vension, wild turkey, and cottontails, but goat and mutton, too. They had eaten only the choicest cuts, as meat was plentiful; but the exposure and life in the open had made their appetites revert to the carnivorous to supply the demands of their bodies. Some food faddist has said that this kind of diet will make men fierce of temper, predatory, warlike. Be that as it may, they were as other men, products and victims of their environment.

Berger finally showed signs of having satisfied his ravenous appetite, and began to wash the dishes he had used. Hardy had finished his smoke, and, knocking the ashes from his pipe, asked: "So you had a little bad luck to-day, did you, kid? Knight seems to feel it worse than you. He ain't come to his appetite yet."

"Yes, we took our ducking in an arroyo. Knight's 'some hoss for a broomtail', as Brewster used to say. Poor old boy! I'm sorry I played him out."

Berger noticed that Hardy's clothes were unusually muddy too, and, as Hardy was in a good humor that evening, he ventured to put his query in the form of a jest: "Judging from your appearance, Hardy, some sheep herder has been rolling you around in the mud again, too."

Hardy laughed tolerantly as he replied to this ludicrous implication: "Baldie and I got mired over in the alkali flats; but let's talk about somethin' interestin', kid. I saw some real white folks to-day, a whole prairie schooner full of 'em,—the old folks an' kids,—one fine lookin', big, corn-fed gal, too, about your age or a little younger, maybe."

Berger was surely taking an active interest in the conversation now, and, observing that Hardy was in a mood to talk, he waited painfully for him to continue.

"They was a drivin' four big mares and had a couple of suckin' colts. The big boys and this gal was a ridin'

real white men's hosses and drivin' a dozen or twenty cows and calves. They had a crate of chickens under the wagon bed. An' the whole housekeepin' outfit inside, cook stove and all, looked as though they'd come to stay."

Berger hardly knew how to carry on a conversation about anything so exciting and unusual as this, but finally asked: "What do you suppose Ortega will think about them?"

"You know the answer to that, kid. But, speakin' of Ortega, I got a letter from Old Mack to-day ordering a general roundup. You can look at it, there in my carryin' case, an' you've got a letter, too. I'll feed Knight a handful of corn while you're a readin'."

Uncle Sam had given each ranger a "forage allowance" of fifty dollars that year, and Hardy and Berger had bought corn with theirs. Knight was still standing where he had been all evening,—too tired to move. But when he saw Hardy coming with the corn, he whinnied his appreciation and began champing it eagerly. Hardy removed the blanket. Knight was dry now, and could go out with the other horses and graze as soon as he had eaten his corn. It had not been necessary to hobble any of the horses for some time now. The hard work and long winter had tamed them. They would be at the camp early in the morning looking for their handful of corn.

Berger's letter was from his mother. She still wrote him each week, with the same love in her heart as of old, and he looked forward with anticipation for her letters. He had never been able to make up with Elaine, however, and had nearly forgotten her.

As Hardy came back to the camp fire, he remarked reflectively: "Old Mack has it timed about right—two weeks before the first of the month. That will give all the boys time to get the order and reach here—an' it'll probably be dry weather by then."

Berger made no comments. He had finished reading the letters and was now greasing his boots, which had been drying by the fire all evening,—holding them over

the live coals to melt in the tallow. This would keep them from freezing so stiff that he could not pull them on in the morning. Hardy pulled off his boots, cleaned the mud from them, and threw them down beside Berger for similar treatment while he had his hand in the tallow, and went to bed.

Berger had nearly finished this task when he was startled by the voice of a man coming from the darkness.

"Whoopee, amigo."

His first impulse was to reach for his gun, which was in its holster on his chaps, just an arm's length from him, but quickly realizing the futility of such a move, as the man was in the darkness and he in the light, he answered, addressing the visitor as a friend and inviting him to come near: "Llege, venga paca, amigo."

An elderly Mexican advanced slowly into the light of the camp fire, holding both hands above his head, palms extended, and proclaiming his friendship at every step. He was dressed in the garb of a sheep herder. His moccasined feet made no noise and left no trace as he walked over the pine needles, and the thought flashed through Berger's mind of how easily an enemy could spy upon their camp and do them harm—how useless their guns—and what Hardy had said so long ago about the flag.

But there was no time for idle thoughts. The old man was jabbering excitedly in his own language, and in an undertone, as though he was afraid of being overheard. He extended his hand to Berger and again avowed his friendship. Hardy had raised up in bed and was peering out through the tent opening, so the old man advanced to him and extended his hand to him also. Hardy shook it and asked him to be seated by pointing to a sheep pelt which lay in front of the tent.

The old man sat down and continued to speak. He did not use a word of English, but his Spanish was good—not the ordinary Mexican sheep herder mixture of English, Spanish, and Indian words. He spoke so rapidly and excitedly, however, that Hardy could understand but

very little of what he said. His manner was earnest and sincere. Berger was evidently very much interested and impressed with what he had to say, and asked questions now and then.

When the old man had finished, Berger interpreted it to Hardy:—"He says his name is Martinez, and that he comes as a friend to warn us against great danger. He says he heard Ortega order his 'caporal' [a mounted superintendent in charge of the sheep herders] to kill you. He says they did not know he had heard their conversation, as he was supposed to be packing the burros with provisions from the storeroom, but he had hid behind the door of Ortega's office, which was ajar, and had overheard their whole conversation. He says that Ortega wants you disposed of in the same way that they disposed of the old prospector and the farmer. He says he comes as a friend, who has suffered much at Ortega's hand. His father, Pablo Martinez, was a Spanish patron of good family and owned many sheep and cattle. His father and Ortega had a quarrel, and Ortega had his father killed, and made peons of him and his brothers, and took away all their cattle and sheep. He also says that Ortega took his daughter, who was then seventeen years of age, and made her his mistress until he tired of her, then gave her to Tom Cady, and now he does not know where she is,—whether dead or alive. He advises you to leave this country—to-morrow, while you are yet alive; for he knows that Ortega's orders will be carried out."

Hardy listened attentively until Berger was through. The old man was anxious to go. Berger tried to persuade him to stay all night, offering to make a good bed by the fire for him; but he refused, saying that he must return to his sheep at once, as his caporal must not know that he had been away, or he also might be killed. Berger persuaded him to eat, however, before he went. This he did hurriedly, and it was very evident that he was extremely anxious to return to his camp, now that his mission was performed.

Just before he left Hardy said to Berger: "Tell him that I am his friend, and I thank him for warning me

against the great danger; but that I will not go. Tell him that the Government of the United States sent me here to do a work; and that, if I am killed, it will send another man—a better one.”

Berger was greatly disturbed over the message, and, after the old man had gone, he had much to say about it. But Hardy sat and thought, making only one more comment: “I reckon the old man was a tellin’ the truth, but it is possible Ortega sent him to throw a scare into me. He’s got Old Mack’s letter by this time, and is a gettin’ most awful squirmish. He ain’t any too good to kill me; but I don’t believe he’s got the nerve to kill one o’ your Uncle Sam’s officers. We’ll stay with ’im anyhow! Eh, kid?”

The two men’s eyes met in apprizal of each other. There was no flinch in Hardy’s eye; and Berger, as grave and sincere as though taking an oath, which he really was, answered: “Yes, sir, and we won’t borrow trouble from the morrow either.”

Hardy extended his hand and Berger grasped it. The look they saw in each other’s eyes expressed plainer than words the sentiment which Hardy uttered: “We’ve been sour sometimes, kid; but it’s all forgotten.”

Hardy and Berger did not ride together much any more. It was a duplication of travel for two to go on an errand that one could accomplish; it took too much horse flesh and time. So each went about alone. Berger had done much riding in securing data for his map, and, when riding the roads and trails, he had counted his horse’s steps and timed him with his watch, estimating the distances as a man would pace, and now he had every road and trail on the district posted with “Mile Signs”, telling the distance to the post-office and other points. He had also posted “Fire Warning” notices and other regulations regarding the use of the Forest. Hardy had done some of this work, too.

It had been aggravating to have some of their notices torn down, but a ludicrous occurrence proved that this

was not always done maliciously. Hardy rode along the trail, one day, which he had posted a short time before, and, seeing that the notices had been torn down, trailed the culprit, with full intention of administering a trouncing when he overtook him. After following the tracks several miles to a Mexican house, he was met at the door by a little girl wearing a brand new dress which her mother had just made for her out of the heavy cotton cloth notices.

They now mingled with the people, explaining and learning the status of their land holdings. They had become quite well acquainted with the common people, counting many friends among them.

Ortega and his influence were the chief causes of difficulty in enforcing the regulations. He had politely but positively refused to remove the fence enclosing thousands of acres of land that did not belong to him. Hardy had of course reported the matter, and Old Mack had written Ortega ordering him to remove it. Ortega not only disregarded these requests, but became indignant when Hardy spoke to him a second time about it.

In short, he was beginning to show his resentment against Uncle Sam's dictation to him in his little kingdom, and especially against Hardy, the instrument of that dictation. He was still confident that through his political power he would eventually obtain the elimination of that part of the Forest; but the web that Hardy was persistently weaving about him interfered with his business. It was tantalizing, humiliating, and unendurable to him.

The thought of Hardy's rounding up his cattle was especially bitter. His judgment plainly told him that he could not successfully resist the Federal Government, but his egotism could not conceive of Hardy's daring to dictate to him right there on the ground.

What would his people think of his declining power? If Hardy should suddenly and mysteriously disappear, all this would stop. Following his habitual tactics, he planned his vengeance on him. Meanwhile he continued to work for the elimination.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROUNDUP

A couple of days before the time set for the roundup, Hardy and Berger moved their camp to a grassy flat surrounding a big spring. As there were no suitable trees near from which to string their tents, they cut poles and put them up "tepee" fashion.

It was dusk and beginning to rain before they finished making camp, so they hurriedly put all of their provisions into one tent, ate a "cold bite", and went to bed together in the other tent.

The black night and the gentle patter of the rain upon the tents gave a feeling of security, and possibly provoked peaceful dreams—at least for three or four hours. Then, the passage from dreamland to that of reality was instantaneous, as they awoke with a start. The sound of horses' hoofs, the swish of a rope, and the "Yepe-ee" were lost in the scramble—for scramble it was, like eggs in a pan or cats in a sack they were tumbled together, lifted through the air, and bumped over the ground.

Another "Yepe-ee", and Brewster had dismounted and was pulling his rope off of the tents and unfastening the tent flap: "Where's the door to you fellows' house? Why don't you come out and say 'hello' when someone comes a visiting? I just arrived to help you with that roundup."

It had stopped raining, but was quite dark; and, as Hardy and Berger untangled themselves and emerged from the tent, they were as "blind as bats". Hardy's first remarks,—which are not repeatable here,—were decidedly antagonistic and uncomplimentary to Brewster, plainly expressing disgust at the entire performance. But this time he was fully awake and made no rash move, as he had when he shot the dog. When Berger collected his

bewildered senses sufficiently to express himself, it was to mingle his hearty laugh with that of Brewster's.

Hardened by their winter in the open, the tumble had done them no harm. Finally Hardy began to see the joke. "I'll get even with you!" he laughingly exclaimed, making a pass at Brewster as though to clinch.

Brewster threw his weight forward. Hardy seized him, dropped to the ground, thrust his foot up, caught Brewster in the stomach and threw him high and hard. Brewster came down sprawling on all fours, some fifteen feet back of where Hardy had stood when the scuffle began.

Hardy was on his feet chuckling to himself, and, as Brewster picked himself up, he advanced with extended hand, drawling: "Unsaddle your old crow-baits and make yourself at home."

Retrieving their wearing apparel from the wrecked tent, Hardy and Berger were soon dressed. Berger helped Brewster unsaddle and unpack while Hardy started a fire. When finished, Brewster dragged the prize saddle, which he had brought back with him, into the camp fire circle.

"Have you had supper, Brewster?—or breakfast?" asked Berger. "I haven't much idea which is in order."

"No, neither one—nor dinner, that is, not to-day," answered Brewster as he looked at his watch. "Twelve minutes past twelve. I ate yesterday morning at sun up, just before leaving home. But why ask such a question at this ungodly hour?"

Berger reached for the dutch oven and skillet, asking as he placed them on the coals: "Why the ungodly hour, Brewster? Explain your conduct!"

Hardy had been examining and admiring the prize saddle, and now as he turned it over and settled his back comfortably against it, he echoed Berger's query: "Yes, why, Brewster, why?"

"And how did you know where our camp was?" Berger excitedly asked.

Brewster had picked up a water bag and was now

holding it between his knees, pouring water over his hands and washing both hands and face. Thus occupied, he could not readily reply. Presently he reached for a towel, and said: "Give me time. I'll explain."

Berger had some ham frying, Hardy had lighted his pipe, and Brewster had rolled a cigarette, when he began: "I'll answer your last question first, 'cause it's the easiest. Everybody knows where your camp is. All of the—"

Berger interrupted: "But we just moved it to-day—I mean yesterday."

"Yes, and everybody knows that, too," said Brewster. "I overheard an hombre report that fact to Tom Cady an hour after dark. This roundup you fellows are about to pull off is a causing some excitement."

Brewster paused and looked at Hardy to give this statement emphatic meaning. But Hardy evinced no curiosity, so he continued: "I dropped in at Tom Cady's place along about supper time. But, by the way, I didn't eat supper. Didn't have time to. Got into a game. Lost several dollars, but finally put up my pearl handled six gun against that prize bridle, and won. It's tied on my saddle out there."

"You mean the one to match my saddle? The one the chicken pull was for, election day?" exclaimed Hardy.

"Yes. That is what I mean. I'll get it in a minute"; and, stepping over to his saddle, Brewster soon returned with the bridle. Throwing it into Hardy's lap, he said: "That's your present. Now will you be good!"

Turning the bridle over in his hands caressingly, Hardy drawled his appreciation: "Your explanation is most awful acceptable, Brewster."

Berger too was examining the fancy bridle: "That is, without exception, the finest bridle I have even seen," he enthusiastically said.

Brewster continued: "I haven't completed my explanation yet. As I said before, this roundup is causing some excitement. I noticed it plain enough at Cady's. Seemed like the atmosphere was charged with it. 'Course they all knew what I was coming for, with this string of horses.

And—well, after I won the bridle and gave them a chance or so to win it back, I backed out through the door—kind of awkward like.

"It was black as your hat outside. But somehow I managed to move this way. Had no notion of finding your camp till morning. But those white tepees of yours were as conspicuous as a white collar on a cowboy. And, now fellows, I want to apologize. I had plumb forgot that your tents had floors in them."

Berger interrupted: "Your apology is as acceptable as your explanation," and as all joined in the laugh, he added, "our memories are short, too. We have forgotten and forgiven."

The biscuits were done. The slicker was spread, the table set, and soon they were busily engaged "feeding the animal", as Brewster put it.

The next morning an inventory of Brewster's outfit disclosed the fact that he had a mount of eight fine saddle horses, and his panniers were bulging with provisions,—enough to last a month. His horses showed that they had been well cared for, and Brewster himself was as handsome as ever. He had not been obliged to live in the open, as had Hardy and Berger, for he had a neat little log cabin ranger station. Being in close touch with the white settlements, he had not grown a beard, nor backslid in personal appearances, as had Hardy and Berger. In fact Hardy said he looked "fit to kill".

He seemed greatly pleased that Hardy had been successful in catching and subduing Knight, but refused to accept him, saying: "Oh, forget it, Hardy! I was just a jokin' when I asked you to catch him for me. What would I do with more horses? Got a whole woods full of them now."

"But I wasn't joking," Hardy insisted. "He's your hoss, by rights."

"No, Hardy, you keep him. You need him worse than I do. Forget it!" The fact was, Brewster was too proud to ride a mustang. He often remarked: "Give me 'blood' in a horse."

They put the prize saddle and bridle on Cyclone and Hardy started for the mail, saying as he left: "Reckon Old Ortega'll be mighty pleased to get a look at this outfit. Might take his mind off of the roundup for a minute."

Berger and Brewster rode out and counted sheep that day. When they returned, they found Hardy at camp, and supper nearly ready. "Well, Hardy, did the Mayor Domo get a slant at your fancy race hoss and riggin'?" asked Brewster as he rode up.

"Reckon so. He an' Cady was a sittin' on the steps, but they had nothin' to say to me."

"What's that coming over the ridge there?" Berger asked, pointing up the trail.

Brewster reached for the binoculars. One look, and he exclaimed: "It is Blair with his whole outfit!"

Blair drew near, riding a pure white, watch eyed horse—a hark back to Arabian stock,—driving before him his string of Indian ponies—pinto, buckskin, roan, bluegray, sorrel and black—packed lightly, without pack saddles or panniers. He presented a picture worthy of the brush of an artist. As he rode up, Hardy advanced with extended hand. But the watch eyed horse shied, and swerved out of reach so they could not shake hands.

Brewster yelled out: "What kind of a wild hoss you a ridin'?"

Blair hastened to explain: "He's plumb a feared o' whiskers, Hardy. Now it's right contrary to my principles ter be dispolite; but if ye and Berger thar ever expect ter get right intimate an' sociable with this here Watcheye, ye'll have ter bribe some locoed sheep shearin' hombre ter amputate them thar goat-tees o' your'n. I shave every mornin' afore sun up."

Brewster exploded with mirth at Blair's impromptu jibe at Hardy's and Berger's whiskers which he himself did not much admire. He yelled out again to Blair: "Well, get down off of the wise old fool, and get acquainted."

Watcheye was capering about, pawing and snorting, encircling the camp. Blair unfastened a gunny sack from

the saddle and threw it upon Berger's shoulder. It clung for an instant. Berger exclaimed, "Ouch!" and grabbed for it as it fell to the ground.

"A cat! Sure as I'm born!"

And sure enough, out jumped a cat.

Blair was explaining again. "That thar is my most intimate living being associate—kind o' soul mate,—ever present an' indispensable. Its magic powers protect me from all evil. Wears whiskers. Watcheye hates him."

Berger was now giggling like a school boy. The next instant Blair had his rope down, and swerving sharply among his ponies, settled the loop over Pinto's head and led him back to camp. Dismounting, he immediately began to unpack. As he pulled his bed off, something in a huge leather case dropped out, and as it struck the ground, there was a distinct metallic sound from within.

"Horrors and magic; and more of it!" Berger exclaimed between laughs.

With the reins on the ground, Watcheye stood stock still, but with ears twitching backward and forward nervously. Again Blair was explaining: "This here instrument," as he pulled a typewriter from the case, "is considered absolutely necessary fer me ter possess. That thar fuss an' feathers clerk in Old Mack's office contends that my natural handwritin' is plumb incomprehensible ter an educated man, and plumb non-decipherable."

Brewster's impetuosity interrupted the monologue as he walked up and grasped Blair roughly by the hand. "How are you, anyway?"

Blair's answering grip was too hard. They tried to twist each other's wrists. A rough-and-tumble "catch as catch can" scuffle followed, which, before it ended, caused the men to upset the coffee pot, scatter ashes all over the prepared meal, and force the cat to take refuge high and safe in the saddle on Watcheye's back. Watcheye twitched his ears, snorted and pawed, but stood his ground.

Berger was insane with excitement. Little wonder,—

laughable incidents had not been common in the life he and Hardy had been living.

But for all this, the conduct of Watcheye had not escaped his notice or admiration. As Blair came up, he asked: "How do ye like him, Berger?"

"He's sure a beauty, Blair."

"Git on ter him. Try his gait if ye want ter. He's right gentle—that is, if yer whiskers are trimmed," he added with a sly wink at Brewster.

Berger advanced toward Watcheye. Watcheye snorted and backed off, dragging the reins. The cat jumped down. Blair stepped up. "Let me hold him till ye get on. I told ye he's plumb a feared o' whiskers. He sure has a right easy gait."

Berger struck the saddle. Blair let go—and Watcheye went to it. Berger tried to hold his head up; but nothing doing. Then he let him go!

Blair and Brewster doubled with spasms of laughter. Hardy chuckled again, as he watched Berger ride "high, wide and handsome", his admiration gaining complete control and expression: "The kid is a ridin'!"

"Ridin' plumb clean!" exclaimed Blair, as he watched Berger fanning Watcheye with his hat, spurring shoulder and flank, while Watcheye pitched and plunged through his "bag of tricks".

"My God! He's goin' over back with him!" yelled Brewster; but the next instant his yell was the "Yepe-ee"—for, as Watcheye went over backwards, Berger landed on his feet, and as Watcheye jumped up, he sprang into the saddle again to fan him some more with his hat.

Watcheye was done. Berger then tried his gaits and rode him back to camp.

To repeat the words, and describe in detail the acts of all the participants at this roundup would constitute a book in itself. Dennis was the last to arrive, and he came trailing in with enough guns and ammunition to start a small arsenal. He and Blair were not on speaking terms, which made it rather awkward for the whole crowd.

Dennis was, in reality, trying to be a "bad man". He came from a good family and had been reared in the East, as well as having the advantage of a good education. But about the time he had completed his college course, he was taken with the Western fever, and landed in New Mexico on a cattle ranch which catered to Eastern tourists. There he had ridden with the so-called cowboys, and become as wild as any of them. After a couple of years of this ranch life he had returned to the East, and, while there, had married a society girl, whose father was very high politically.

The father had secured for Dennis a position in Washington appropriate to the station of their family. But Dennis was dissatisfied. He could think or talk of nothing but the Wild West. Everyone he met he entertained with wild stories of what he had seen and done in the West. This soon became tiresome to his wife and her father and associates, and between them it was decided to let Dennis return to the life he liked so well. Through them he had secured a place with the Forest Service, which accounted for his being a ranger on this new National Forest.

He was continually practicing with his six shooter and rifle, and thought that a real bad man should use the old style ".45 six shooter". As an evidence of his proficiency in its use, he would cock it while whirling it on his finger as he drew it from its scabbard. That particular practice had nearly cost him his life, as he shot a hole through the brim of his hat one day while performing.

One of his habits was to practice shooting at imaginary enemies coming in through the door of his tent, every morning before arising. He imagined that every man he met in the trail was trying to get the drop on him, and he always made it a point to beat him to it. He had the Mexicans on his district terrorized, and the few white men whom he met sized him up as being locoed. Of course he had read all of the Western books he could find, and, true to his idea, he had all of the Western

paraphernalia. To accentuate his supposedly manly features, he had trained his mustache to hang down at the corners an inch or two below his chin. All in all, he was as near the Jesse James type of bad man as he could make himself, and he tried to act the part.

Blair was afraid of Dennis, not because of his bravery, but because of his mania and inexperience in handling firearms. Having lived in the range country along the border, Blair had seen all he cared to of gun play and never drew a gun in fun. When he drew his gun, it was to shoot. He did not enjoy having to watch Dennis continually, nor did he like to have Dennis watching him. Another reason why he did not wish to have any trouble with Dennis was because Old Mack had given him particular orders to stop quarreling with Dennis. The matter over which they had had trouble was a trivial affair and had long since been settled.

The night before the day appointed for the roundup saw them all present and establishing camp. But the strained state of affairs set Brewster wild. His impetuous nature refused to let it continue, and, after Blair and Dennis were through washing for supper, he brought the two men together and told them either to shake hands or fight, as he was getting tired of such foolishness. This so took Dennis off of his feet that he promptly shook hands with Blair.

This relieved the tension, and after that everyone was sociable and life much more enjoyable. Each ranger had brought his complete outfit, including everything he might need to last him a month; so, after Blair and Dennis had made up, they put their supplies together in a common mess and made their camp together.

In the little valley above the camp were twenty-five horses which constituted their mount. This was hardly enough for a strenuous roundup with the several riders, but it would have to do.

Berger and Hardy had been counting some of the sheep since Old Mack's orders had been received, but there

were still a large number yet to be counted. Hardy thought it best for all hands to turn in and help count the rest of the sheep before they started the cattle roundup, as the sheep were still in the foothills and most of them were being shorn. So they worked at this for a couple of days, Brewster and Dennis riding together and Berger and Blair riding together. Hardy rode alone. All covered different strips of territory which had not been previously covered.

The herders were not very pleased to see these men come in and give orders to round up the sheep. However, there was no parleying. The mounted white men with six shooters and Uncle Sam to enforce their commands were not to be ignored. No doubt, at times the rangers were overbearing and officious in their manner, but at any rate their actions were quite effective in causing the sheep to be rounded up and counted very promptly.

It was recognized by all that Brewster was the best mounted, and that he understood the cattle business, especially in that mountain country, better than any of the others. So Hardy made him foreman of the roundup. This was agreeable to everyone, and his orders were taken as final, so far as conducting the work was concerned. Hardy acted as cook and camp manager.

The biggest cattle camp on the lower range was selected as their first piece of work, and before starting in they moved their camp down to that locality. Ortega's foreman was somewhat inclined to parley with them about their right to count the cattle. Hardy, of course, explained to him what the Government's instructions were, and Brewster followed up by informing Ortega's men that they could either help with the roundup or get out of the way. Some of them hung around looking on, while others went posthaste to Ortega to report the matter.

This news made Ortega more furious than ever. He did not dare tell his peons to oppose the Government officers, and, of course, he did not wish to show the white feather before them. So, rebuking the messengers, calling them pig and dog, he told them to go back and

take care of their cattle, and not be hanging around his office.

The herders were common peons, used to taking orders from their superiors, and, as Brewster was a man of commanding personality and accustomed to giving orders, within a short time he had most of the men at work helping him.

Dennis was looking for an opportunity to show off his Wild West dexterity, and the first day of the roundup, when a steer came by, he lassoed it and was about to throw it, to show the crowd his ability. As the rope tightened, however, Brewster's six shooter spoke, and Dennis was left with but half his rope in his hands. Brewster then instructed him, without harshness, not to mistreat the cattle in any way, and to count them just as though they belonged to a white man.

The sudden cutting of the lariat rope and the prompt issuance of orders by Brewster had again taken Dennis off of his feet, showing him how small an impression his bold, bad life had made. Thereafter Dennis had much more respect for Brewster and his ability to use a gun. It also served as an object lesson to the Mexicans, as they were not used to seeing such expert shooting, and it gave them a wholesome respect for Brewster.

Up until the time of this incident Brewster had dominated the roundup by his personality. But this act made him the recognized boss from the viewpoint of everyone. This little lesson in Western life was only the first of many which Dennis learned before the roundup was over.

Target practice was one of the principal amusements about camp when there was time for recreation; and this did not always take much time. One morning, as they were preparing breakfast, Brewster decided to find out if Dennis could make good on his tales about his ability in shooting. Tossing up a milk can which he had just emptied, he shouted "Shoot!" in the imperative manner that he used when he wanted something done immediately. This was a risky thing to do, because everyone

was in danger of being shot when Dennis pulled his gun, but before he had had time to take aim, Blair had leisurely put two holes in the can.

At another time Brewster let Dennis ride one of his horses, as Dennis's own horses were not very good. It was a high spirited horse, and, when Dennis mounted, it began to buck. This was probably the first time Dennis had ever ridden a good, high spirited, pitching horse, and his ride did not last long. So Dennis was converted from a bad man into an understudy, and by the time the roundup was over he had become quite subdued.

There was little fun in the roundup itself, as it consisted in riding out bright and early each morning, rounding up all of the cattle in a district,—mountain, valley, or cañon,—and holding them in one herd long enough to count them. Occasionally it was necessary to keep them together overnight on account of gathering them too late in the evening to count them before dark, or to keep them from going back with those which were not yet counted.

A few days of such work began to tire the men and horses, as they were working shorthanded; but they completed the work without serious difficulty.

Ortega never appeared during the time the work was in progress, but his anger was becoming more intense day by day. Brewster's success as a foreman in getting Ortega's men to work for him, the gun play which was daily occurring at the camp to the astonishment and admiration of the Mexicans, and the officious way in which all of the rangers were giving orders and acting, made Ortega feel that his power was slipping. As a climax, before the roundup was completed, in came Old Mack.

Mack had not come to pay Ortega an official visit, but to find out from the common people the real truth about the situation. He let the rangers know what charges had been made against them and they had promptly denied and refuted some of these charges. Hardy admitted, however, that he had whipped a few of the Mexicans on various occasions. And they all recognized that at times

they had been rather officious in their conduct. But Berger and Brewster were particularly incensed on account of the exaggerated charges that had been filed against them because of the way they had conducted themselves at the bailes. Undoubtedly some of the things of which they were accused were, in reality, a part of Thorne's and Casper's experiences, but in addition they were accused of many other things which had never occurred. Likewise, according to the reports, Hardy was guilty of every crime but murder.

After going about the neighborhood for a time, collecting affidavits and other evidence from the common peons, and learning that many of them were secret admirers of Brewster and Hardy, Mack went to see Ortega and told him the whole story. Ortega realized that many of the people were beginning to look to the rangers for their orders rather than to him, and that his position was insecure.

Old Mack knew that to remove the trespassing sheep and cattle from the Forest at this season of the year would mean serious loss to the owners and suffering to the animals, as there was neither grass nor water outside of the Forest sufficient for their needs. Furthermore, he had no objection to their being in the Forest if properly handled. It was only a matter of Ortega's obeying the Forest Service regulations. There were some overgrazed areas, however, and other places where he did not wish to have much stock grazed on account of the young forest growth.

Before returning to his office he instructed his rangers to look after the stock in such a manner as to avoid any damage to the Forest. This could be accomplished only by going to Ortega, or to the men in direct charge of the stock on the range and telling them where to graze. When the rangers began to give directions to Ortega's men in this manner, it was the last straw, so far as Ortega was concerned.

He had not been idle by any means, as was evidenced by the flood of new complaints against the rangers, the

reports continually coming into his office giving him fresh material, which, with the usual exaggeration, was sufficient for his purpose. He had been sending special messengers to the railroad with telegrams, bringing to bear all of the influence within his power to secure the removal of the rangers and the elimination of this part of the Forest.

Old Mack's visit was most disheartening to Ortega, however, as he was about to face a trespass suit; and to have the rangers designating where his stock should graze and the almost complete control which they exercised over his outfits was unendurable to him.

As a result, he called in Tom Cady for consultation and discussed the matter with him. He also called in two or three more of his henchmen. The outcome of these conferences was soon to be known.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TURN IN THE TRAIL

Old Mack had been gone only a couple of days. The roundup was nearly complete, and the rangers were ready to start for home. Brewster had been up on the Trujillo Mesa, where the boys had a bunch of cattle rounded up for the count, and was returning alone by way of Cañon Bonito—a little used, short-cut trail which wound its way along the side of the cañon wall from one bench in the rock to another.

Cady had known that Brewster would return by this trail as several of his faithful peons who were working in the roundup in the capacity of spies had been keeping him well informed for several days past as to Brewster's activities and plans. Knowing Brewster's nature as he did, Cady had surmised correctly that, if Brewster went to the Trujillo Mesa that day, he would return by the short cut, even though it was a dangerous trail, rather than ride miles around. So he had stationed himself at a point in this trail where it turned abruptly around a point of rock. Here he could shoot Brewster and his horse, and, rolling them over the edge of the rock, watch them drop into the abyss below, where neither man nor horse could travel alive. The bodies would never be found, and Brewster's disappearance could not be laid at his door.

Cady had left his own horse a few paces down the trail, securely tied to a projecting rock, and had stationed himself at the most advantageous point overlooking the narrow trail, so that, when Brewster came around the point, he would look face to face into the muzzle of Cady's gun. The rifle he had selected was a "U.S. 30" with soft nozed bullet. This would do the work effectively—there would be no bungling of the job. He

figured the gun was powerful enough that a bullet would tear the opposite quarter off of Brewster's horse. But he would cover Brewster first, perhaps even talk a little, just to have the satisfaction of expressing his own personal views of the rangers' activities, and to give Brewster his chance.

For all of Cady's degeneration he was still a white man. He could not shoot a man from ambush—he prided himself on that. He would meet his victim face to face and give him his chance. Besides, it would give him more satisfaction that way. But he did not intend that chance to be more than a chance. Fully realizing the quick resourcefulness of his intended victim, he expected to get the advantage and to keep it. Ever since his fight with Casper he had harbored hatred in his heart for the rangers, and especially for Brewster, who was so arrogant in his manner. He had begged and counseled with his master many times to let him have revenge and rid the country of their presence. Now his opportunity was at hand!

Unaware of all this, Brewster came riding along, his faithful saddle animal picking its way cautiously, sure-footedly, down the narrow trail, relieving its rider of all anxiety. It was at times like this, when riding along some lonesome trail, that Brewster relaxed and, while unconsciously admiring and drinking in the wonders of Nature all about, filled his mind with visions,—thoughts of the time when he should settle down and have a ranch and a home,—*home* in the fullest and truest sense,—the sense in which every man thinks of a home when his thoughts reflect the innermost desires of his being.

"Up with your hands!" came the command sharply, imperatively. There was no doubting that the speaker was in earnest.

Brewster's horse stopped abruptly—as surprised as its rider, but not recovering as quickly. Brewster's quick glance traveled over the barrel of that gun and met the murderous gleam and joyous triumph registered in Cady's eyes.

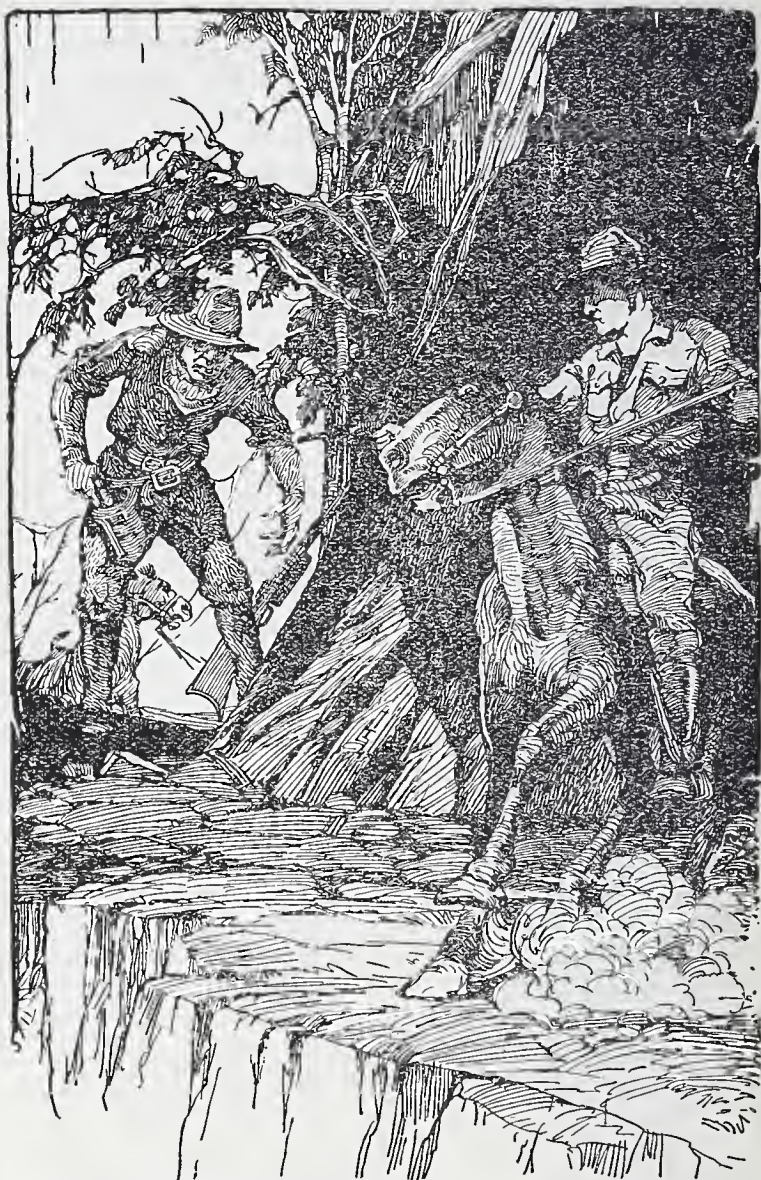
The rifle spoke, but Brewster was not *there*.

The infinitesimal part of an instant which had been employed by Brewster's quick glance had been sufficient for him to pull himself from his day dream, fully perceive the situation, decide upon a course of action, and act. The act was not to throw up his hands, but to drive the opposite spur deep into his surprised mount, at the same instant throwing his body forward in the saddle. He had been quicker than Cady in both thought and action; the forward movement of his body had thrown him out of Cady's aim.

Brewster pulled his horse up short as he straightened in the saddle. Cady begun to work the lever on the rifle to eject the empty cartridge and supply another. Then, in his excitement, he suddenly realized that he had made the wrong choice of weapons, and, dropping the rifle, reached for his forty-five which hung in its holster low on his hip—almost half way to the knee, where it could be handily reached without unnecessary or cramped bending of the elbow, all of which would take time when time was scarce. If ever time was scarce for Cady it was then,—too scarce,—for the revolver was only half drawn from its holster when a bullet from Brewster's gun shattered it, taking a part of Cady's thumb along with it. Then his hands went high above his head, and an expression of abject fear came over his brutal countenance.

Brewster deliberately replaced his six gun in its holster. Quick perception, decision, and action had again served him well. There was now no further need for haste. Cady could wait. Reaching out his hand, he patted the beautiful horse which was standing alert, every nerve and muscle strained to catch and act upon the next desire of its master, and spoke in a loving tone: "Little too quick for him, eh, King? Ha! Ha!" and his exultant laugh rang out full and long, winding up with the "yep-e-e" of the cowboy.

This relieved the nervous tension of the horse. He knew his master and his way. Then, still speaking to his horse, Brewster continued: "Let's turn around and



"He suddenly realized that he had made the wrong choice of weapons, and dropping the rifle, reached for his forty-five."

visit a little with this 'thing'," at the same time indicating his desire by turning the reins on King's neck. When they were faced about, they stood directly in front of Cady, who was still reaching for the sky and becoming more frightened each moment, if such a thing was now possible.

While rolling a cigarette, Brewster began his remarks in a most sarcastic tone: "You know it's kind o' lonesome an' monotonous a ridin' along these trails all alone. I'm real glad to have met you here in this lonely spot, Mr. Cady."

Then, as though suddenly noticing that Cady was in a rather uncomfortable position standing there and reaching for something so far above him that he could not possibly reach it, he said: "Sit down and make yourself comfortable while we do a little visitin'."

"And, by the way, what was you a shootin' at? I'm afraid I may have discommoded your aim a trifle, coming around that point unexpected like. But you see I didn't know you was a standin' there, or that you was a goin' to shoot."

Cady was about to speak, but Brewster, perceiving this, was again too quick for him, interrupting before he had even made a sound: "No, you just keep perfectly still. You haven't anything to say, anyhow, and, besides, I'm a talkin' and don't care to be interrupted. That's when I enjoy visitin',—when I can do all the talkin', and have a good listener like you to talk to. I'll answer my own questions, too."

Then, changing his voice from banter to a matter-of-fact business tone, he continued: "You was a shootin' at me. . . . Why?"

"Because Old Ortega sent you to kill me, and also because you thought it would be fun, not likin' me any too well yourself."

"Then why didn't I kill *you*? Eh?"

"Just because I am no murderer. I don't believe in killin' men for the fun of it, nor as a business. If it had

been necessary, I would have killed you. I killed a man once, but it was necessary. Even at that I didn't feel good over it. I have wished a thousand times, if I have once, that it could have been avoided, but in your case it wasn't necessary. If I had missed that gun,—came near to it as I was a shootin' at your wrist,—then it would have been necessary. I would have had to plug you. You know you deserve it, you low down despicable brute. Why God lets such men live I don't know. The Devil's got no use for 'em. You're too damned slow. The Devil wouldn't have a bungler like you. You're simply a harmless, useless thing encumbering the earth."

Then, reflectively, as though about to change his mind, he added: "Don't know after all as it would be any great sin to shuffle you off and toss you over the brink there. That's what you intended to do with me, wasn't it?"

Cady turned white with terror, and began to stammer something, but again Brewster cut him short.

"Keep it shut! I'll answer my own questions. That's what you was a goin' to do with me all right, but I am not goin' to do it with you for the reasons I have already mentioned. But I am a goin' to give you a little advice: When you come a gunnin' for me again, be sure and make a good job of it. Don't go a shootin' your cannon off into space like you did to-day. For, if you do, I'll consider it *necessary to bore you*. It makes me nervous to have shootin' goin' on too close around my ears. Next time it will be necessary to bore you. *Necessary! Do you get that?*"

Cady did not try to answer with his mouth. He was so grateful to get away alive that it is doubtful if he could have spoken. Instead he extended his hand.

This Brewster declined. "No. You're too low down for me to shake hands with, and, furthermore, we are not friends, you know. Besides, maybe you didn't notice it, but your hand is rather bloody to offer to a gentleman to shake."

Cady had apparently forgotten the missing thumb, if, indeed, he had ever realized that it was missing. More important matters had been occupying his mind.

Brewster continued: "We'll tie that up a bit before we ride along." And, turning in his saddle, he reached for his carrying case, from which he took a "First Aid Packet" and, pouring water from his water bag over Cady's hand to wash off the blood, dressed his wound.

"Now, you low down imitation of a white man, with the attributes of a rattlesnake, skunk, snail, and buzzard, put your cannon there in its scabbard," pointing to the big rifle lying on the rocks. "Mount your runty cayuse and hit the trail. Don't stop until you get to Old Ortega's office and make your official report. And, by the way, if you have any inclination to turn your head around,—to glance back over your shoulder or anything like that, while you're on the way,—just remember what happened to Lot's wife. Maybe, though, you've never heard about that. Well, just keep your nose pointin' straight ahead anyhow for luck. And may God have mercy on your shriveled soul."

Cady was so grateful for Brewster's unexpected kindness in not killing him that he thanked him sincerely, and promised never to bother him again under any circumstances.

When Brewster reached camp, he almost forgot his own experience when he heard Dennis excitedly telling the other men about finding the body of a man. It had been buried in an arroyo, but the spring floods had partially uncovered it. The body was badly decomposed, but from appearances the man had been shot through the heart. Dennis was so excited that the other men had difficulty in securing any real information about the dead man; but finally they learned enough to infer that it was the farmer who had disappeared so mysteriously during the winter.

CHAPTER XIV

A HURRIED DISMOUNT

The sensation caused by Dennis's almost hysterical report regarding finding the murdered farmer's body had not subsided when Brewster abruptly broke the trend of thought: "Dennis! Ride your cayuse up the draw and bring in some fresh hosses,—a mount for each of us."

Dennis's horse was still standing, saddled and bridled, just outside of the camp fire circle. Dennis had been too excited to unsaddle when he came in that evening. Perhaps the neglected horse was partly the cause of Brewster's order, for he surely did dislike to see a horse mistreated, but, be that as it may, Dennis lost no time in starting to comply with the command,—as command it had been, issued in the tone of voice and serious manner characteristic of Brewster when giving orders. It was not to be questioned, but obeyed. The moon was shining almost as bright as day. Dennis would have no trouble getting the horses, as they were now all tame and gentle from the hard riding since the roundup began.

As he disappeared up the draw, all eyes turned on Brewster, looking for an explanation; but no one asked a question. The explanation was in the expression of unsuppressed mirth spreading over Brewster's face, emanating from his eyes, and finding complete expression finally in his old time, care free, exultant laugh, ending with the yep-e-e!

The tension was broken, and the old farmer forgotten for the instant. Blair was the first to get the "drift" though, and, as he met the merry glint in Brewster's eyes with that of his own, voiced his impressions: "Fer jest pure, unadulterated, unabridged, hellish deviltry, ye've got the world beat, Brewster"; and, turning to Hardy, as though to get his verification, continued: "Now there

ain't another human livin' who would a thought o' sendin' that thar poor locoed, scared-to-death tenderfoot out into this here wicked world all alone an' unprotected, an' in the night, jest on the concocted excuse o' gettin' a fresh hoss apiece fer us fellers."

All were now just splitting their sides laughing. Even Hardy could not keep his face straight, and didn't try, when the ludicrousness of the situation dawned upon him.

Turning again to Brewster, Blair added, between spasms of chuckles: "It's plumb cruel—cruelty to animals."

Brewster broke in with: "What'll he think when he finds the Mexicans are gone? You know they broke camp just after dark and left—every last one of them. There's a big celebration of some kind to-morrow."

Hardy drawled: "What he'll think will be a plenty. 'Course he's wonderin' what Brewster wants with fresh mounts at this time o' night; and, when he finds the Mexicans' camp gone, he'll have some most awful suspicions. Reckon he's losin' no time. That farmer business sure throwed a scare into 'im. I never did see a man scared up so over a dead man. He's been a hearin' some tales about Old Ortega. If he asked me once, he asked me a dozen times, if I thought Old Ortega had anything to do with the old farmer's death; an', when I'd tell 'im that I hadn't any inside information regardin' Old Ortega's executions, he'd just get crazier 'an ever. Reckon he thinks he's right at the scene o' some o' them Wild West killin's he's been a readin' so much about."

"And he thinks he's the next victim on the list," Berger commented.

Blair remarked in a more serious tone: "It's not so almighty improbable that he ain't tolerable near to the scene o' some o' them thar Wild West stunts. But that's what he's been a hankerin' fer, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's just it," said Brewster. "That's partly why I sent him up there alone. He'll be dodgin' every old burnt stump and a seein' hobgoblins all the way, he's so unstrung."

Here Brewster paused long enough to chuckle: "But that wasn't the main reason I sent him. I wanted to tell you about a little plan I had in mind, and I didn't want him in on it. Then, too, I didn't want to listen to his gobble about the old farmer all evening. Berger says there's to be a baile at Cady's to-morrow night, and it occurred to me, now that the roundup is over and we all need a little relaxation, that we'd ought to take it in and show Old Ortega and his 'compadres' that we can live up to the reputation he has taken so much pains to give us."

Blair was enthusiastic and lost no time expressing himself: "If it's my presence ye are requestin', fer one, ye can put it down that I accept with pleasure, an' will try right smart to live up ter the reputation—me an' Juan." Juan was the name of his cat which was now, as always, when Blair was loafing about the camp fire, sitting on his knee, enjoying the stroking of its fur. In fact, Juan had become the mascot of the camp.

"Here too!" joined Berger; and, turning to Blair, he added: "I suppose you will take your typewriter along too. It ought to come in handy. And, besides, it might be necessary to record the minutes of the meeting, you know."

"Certain! Certain! Bein' altogether probable that a right smart lot o' them thar locoed sheep shearing hombres will jest naturally drink themselves plumb to death. What would I have to chronicle their dying words with if I didn't take it?"

"Chronicle the loving words of some señorita bonita, you mean," said Brewster, as he rolled another cigarette. "But I was goin' to tell you just why I didn't want Dennis in on this. I met Cady up on the Cañon Bonita trail to-day, and he took a shot at me, and there will be a rather strained feeling at that baile perhaps."

"Took a shot at you?" echoed Berger.

"Yes, but he missed, and I managed to handle him

without killin' him. 'Course he needs killin', but I don't want to do it."

Hardy could keep still no longer: "Still, you propose to go to his dance and give him provocation to kill you!"

Here Brewster interrupted: "Provocation! Hell! Provocation won't make him kill me; Old Ortega's ordered 'im to." Then, lowering his voice, he continued in a more respectful tone: "You know conditions here, Hardy. You're not goin' around asleep, nor with your eyes shut. We've started somethin' that we've got to finish. If Berger and I don't go to this baile, they will think we are afraid to go. Old Ortega will think he has won a point with his infernal petition. Berger and I have been to every dance or shindig there has been within a day's ride of us, and we've just got to go to this one or show the white feather. And we can't afford to do that at this stage of the game. I claim it's our duty to go. We've got to fight this thing out here on the ground; the Service can't help us no great lot."

Hardy was not convinced at the great wisdom of the plan: "There's some reason to your logic, Brewster. I get your point. But Old Mack is with us just so long as we are doin' our best to enforce the regulations in a civil manner; but he won't stand for too awful much of this rough stuff."

"I suppose you chastised that mule-ridin' caporal in a civil manner," Brewster sarcastically retorted. "I tell you, if Old Mack was here in my place, he'd go to that baile. You've heard about the time he brought in that bunch of cow rustlers without a warrant. He simply took the law in his own hands and brought those fellers in just because they threatened to get him. And he swore out the warrant when he took them before the justice twelve hours after he'd arrested 'em with his gun."

"That's not a parallel case, Brewster."

"There comes Dennis with the horses," Berger warned.

Brewster lowered his voice to reply to Hardy once more before Dennis entered the circle. "Of course,

Hardy, you know that us fellers wouldn't do anything at that baile any more than we've been accused of; and that would only be callin' Old Ortega's bluff. It's no place for Dennis, though, especially in his present state of mind. But for me, when this country gets so tough that I'm afraid to attend the public gatherings and enjoy a little high society life once in awhile, why, I'm a goin' to drift."

Dennis was dismounting now only a few paces away, and Brewster lowered his voice still more, and, looking Hardy squarely in the eye, pronounced his last sentence with sincere respect: "But this is your district, Hardy, and if you say 'No', why we won't go."

Rising to his feet, he called out to Dennis: "Berger and I will take care of the horses, Dennis. You'd better roll in and get some rest. No knowin' just when we'll have to hit the saddle."

As he and Berger advanced to take charge of the horses he asked: "By the way, did you see anything unusual a goin' on up the cañon?"

"Not a soul in sight! The Mexican camp is gone, horses and all!" Dennis fairly gasped this information.

"Just what I expected," Brewster commented.

As Dennis stepped into the light of the camp fire, Blair met him, and, in an undertone that was plainly indicative of suppressed excitement, said: "Brewster jest ordered me to fetch some water. Now, you know I ain't often right badly afflicted with the shakes; but—well, I'm jest goin' to make a clean breast of it to ye, Dennis—shakes is what I've got; fact is, I'm kind o' sick ter my stomach; feel like I was a comin' down with the chills—though 'tain't no weather fer malaria.—I jest wondered if ye wouldn't be so obligin' an accommodatin' as ter go along with me?"

Dennis hesitated. Glancing over at Hardy, who sat just barely out of hearing, and looking straight into the fire, he saw that solemn, puzzled expression—and interpreted it as fear. It was plain enough that Blair was

afraid; and, with Brewster excitedly giving orders, was it strange that Dennis's stammering reply expressed something of the same emotion?

"Why, Blair, I—I'd surely be glad to, but—I'm—er—so completely exhausted, I can hardly drag my feet; been in the saddle since—"

Blair interrupted, plainly disgusted: "Nobody else ain't tired, be they? Are ye goin'—or be ye afeared to?"

"I am not afraid, but—"

"Well, then, grab a bucket; the water has to be got; orders is orders." Even while saying this, Blair, with a nimbleness surprising in one so badly affected with the shakes, had snatched up a couple of canvas water buckets and handed one to Dennis.

"Come on! We won't take ter the regular trail," and, leading the way through the densest of the oak thicket, he continued to encourage and enlighten Dennis: "Now, ye know there ain't a lick o' danger; but there's nothin' like takin' proper pre-contrary measures. We'll jest keep to the brush. Brewster's dead right; we've got to have the water. . . . I rightly recollect, one time down on the border, a gang o' them thar jackaws got us surrounded—an' no water fer about a week. Thirst is right aggravatin' an' intolerable under them thar conditions."

Blair had been gradually lowering his voice. They were now well away from camp, and the brush was not so dense. "Now don't make no more noise than's absolutely necessary, or speak out loud till we get ter that spring an' back ag'in—if we do git back alive. I 'spect if we're dead, we'll be right likely ter be tolerable silent—like the letter 'h' in ghost." The last had been whispered in Dennis's ear in a most ghostly tone.

Finally they reached the spring. Blair carefully and noiselessly dipped a bucket of water and handed it to Dennis. Stooping to dip the other bucket, he paused, and, assuming an attitude of listening, peered across into the forest. One does not have to listen long at night in

a forest to hear peculiar noises. The moon was shining brightly, causing grotesque and hobgoblin shapes in the shadows; the leaves rustled weirdly in the breeze; a top heavy old pine swayed against its neighbor, producing a ghostly, groaning sound; a brittle branch snapped sharply. These and many more natural attributes of the forest were in evidence, nothing more; but Blair did not dip the bucket.

Suddenly throwing himself flat on his back behind a fallen log, he yelled: "Run!"

There was terror in Blair's voice, and Dennis needed no second command. Blair jumped to his feet, but Dennis was already well under way; and the deafening roar of Blair's old forty-five added immediate impetus to his flight. Down the trail he flew; it was no trouble at all now for him to drag his feet. Blair followed as rapidly as possible, but, lacking the same stimulating influences, could not even keep close. No man can run well and laugh.

It was only a short distance to camp. The trail ran across a grassy opening and through an oak thicket. In this thicket a steer lay squarely in the trail, peacefully chewing its cud, all unmindful of lurking dangers. The shadows of the forest cast protective assurance, and entirely obscured the steer from view.

As Dennis came speeding along, there was a head, or rather rear end, collision, and he landed full length along the steer's back. The steer lost no time in recovering consciousness and, bellowing frightfully, hastened to arise in the accustomed manner of steers,—rear end first. This threw Dennis forward in the darkness, and he gave a frightened cry as he grabbed desperately in the air at anything which would help him to get out of the animal's way. He had of course mistaken it for a group of Mexicans trying to kill him, and was doing everything possible to escape.

The steer in its fright rushed forward into camp, and, looking bewilderingly around, spied Hardy; mistaking him for its enemy, it bawled defiantly and, lowering its

head, charged. Hardy jumped up, stepped aside, grabbed a horn and the nose, and bulldogged it as prettily as any matador performing in old Mexico's bull pens. When the steer arose this time, it waited for no further fighting, but plunged off down the trail.

Dennis, as soon as he could recover his feet, rushed off through the brush, making a trail of his own, not stopping for anything that he could get over or break down.

Blair finally arrived in camp and, missing Dennis, explained, between spasms of chuckles, "that the poor locoed tenderfoot should be retrieved an' put to bed in a right decent and hospitable manner."

Berger undertook the perilous mission of retrieving Dennis. Mounting his horse, he rode off through the brush in pursuit, and overtook him a short distance down one of the side trails. Dennis was overjoyed to hear Berger's voice and accompanied him back to camp.

Brewster advanced and extended his hand: "Glad to see you back. Now roll in and get some sleep! No tellin' when this crisis will start again."

"As usual," Blair commented to Hardy, "Brewster spoke the literal truth."

As Dennis squatted on his bed roll and began to unbuckle his spurs, Blair remarked casually: "If it don't discommode yer dreams a hull lot, it might be a right pert idea to leave yer spurs an' boots on. Would jest be a conservation o' right precious time possibly. I don't know nothin', ye understand. But 'pears to me that there's a right ill breeze a blowin' up. Brewster's jest nervous as hell to-night. Ye know Tom Cady took a shot at 'im to-day, an' the 'spics' are actin' right peculiar—the ornary greasers. They're plumb mean—meaner 'an strychnine, an' it ain't altogether improbable that Old Ortega is a settin' 'em up to it right smart."

Dennis, of course, had noticed the mysterious activity and excited jabbering among the Mexicans that day. They were talking over the big celebration,—fiesta and baile—which was about to take place. Dennis could not

understand their language, and to say that his suspicions were aroused would be putting it mildly indeed.

Blair reached over and pulled his rifle from its scabbard and carefully examined it,—working and oiling the lever, and filling the chamber with cartridges. Then he repeated the performance with his six shooter and finally filled every space in his cartridge belt with fresh cartridges from his ammunition box.

For once Dennis was silent. He may have been thinking. At any rate he profited by the example Blair was setting, and nervously busied himself in going over his own artillery in the same manner.

Brewster and Berger arranged the horses in a circle about the camp. "Let's throw the saddles on them just for fun," whispered Berger with a snicker. "It won't hurt them. They will have a chance to rest up now the round up is over."

"Yes, might as well fix it so he will feel perfectly safe and get some rest," Brewster replied—meaning of course just the opposite—as he started for his saddle. During the roundup there had been all work and no play, and now that it was over the boys had to indulge in some form of deviltry. Whoever heard of a roundup breaking up otherwise?

Dennis had not failed to notice what Brewster and Berger had done, but he had rolled into his bed as instructed by Brewster, and with his clothes, boots, and spurs on as suggested by Blair. Blair, to make it strong, was doing likewise.

"That's right, Blair," said Brewster, as he and Berger again joined the circle. "You and Hardy roll in any time you get ready. Berger and I will take our beds and sleep on the outside. Don't suppose there'll be a thing happen though."

The last sentence, however, was not reassuring to Dennis. If he knew anything about Brewster, he was not the kind of a man to be taking such precautions, not expecting anything to happen.

Squatting on his bed roll, Brewster pulled out his six

gun and ejected the empty cartridge and inserted a new one. Then, lighting a cigarette, he sat puffing it slowly, evidently absorbed in deep thought. The cigarette half smoked, Brewster evidently forgot it entirely, and sat there staring into space. Was he thinking of the mission it might have been necessary for that ejected cartridge to have performed? Or was this acting all for Dennis's benefit?

Suddenly coming to with a start, he picked up his bed-roll and rifle and walked out past the circle of saddled horses into the night. Berger silently and solemnly followed, though scarcely able to keep his face straight.

Hardy was already in bed. He enjoyed a little fun as well as anyone, just so it was not carried too far. But this idea of the boys going to that baile did not meet with his approval. Still, as Brewster said, it was no time to show the white feather. Ortega and his henchmen must not get it into their heads that the rangers were afraid of them. So he went to sleep, pondering the matter in his mind.

At break of day Brewster and Berger came striding into the camp circle, carrying their beds and fire arms, broad grins covering their faces. Nothing had happened. Dennis could have testified to that, for there was little doubt but that he had been "most awful wide awake" all night, as Hardy later "reckoned".

Blair crawled out rubbing his eyes and yawning, muttering partly to himself and partly to Juan, but loud enough to be heard by all present: "There's a right smart lot o' wisdom, Juan, in the old adage about an ounce o' prevention bein' worth a pound o' cure. 'Spect maybe now, if Brewster hadn't got plumb wise an' took the proper pre-contrary measures, it might o' been too late fer a cure fer some of us right now. But it's right uncustomary fer ye an' me, Juan, an' right contrary to our habits, bein' too ornary and lazy, I 'spect, to take the trouble to entrench our encampment. Seems to me it would be a mighty nerve rackin' an' troublesome habit to get into,—bein' plumb scared fer fear o' some sudden

calamity. If it should ever come to pass, Juan, that me and ye should get that nervous about our personal welfare an' future an' present tranquility that we should take to crawlin' inter holler logs day times, an' plumb afeared o' the hordes o' plunderin', murderin' savages, that we darsen't appear at a public place, an' had ter put our lights out o' nights—well! I jest wouldn't blame ye, Juan, if ye would plumb lose respect fer yer old pal, an' go plumb locoed. 'Pears ter me it's right smart more edifyin' an' enjoyable to mix with the crowd—be a good mixer as they say, eh, Juan."

During this monologue Blair had been fondling his pet; and, as he spoke the word "mixer", he pulled Juan's whiskers a little too hard, and Juan immediately showed his resentment by biting and scratching at Blair's hands. "I knowed ye'd agree with me. An', if a feller up an' pulls yer whiskers or somethin' right aggravatin', jest mix with 'im. Kind o' more self-respectful way o' livin', eh, Juan?"

Blair should have said "Eh, Hardy?" for it was Hardy whom he wished to inform as to his views.

Hardy caught the inference all right, but his reply was: "Reckon you'd better *mix* the biscuits, Blair, while Brewster and I get the hosses."

While bringing in the horses, Brewster and Hardy had a long and serious talk regarding things in general. Hardy did not forbid the boys going to the baile, however. So it was decided that they would all break camp that day, and Hardy would accompany Dennis part of the way home, while the boys were packing up their outfits and getting ready for the baile.

That day they cut each other's hair, and Berger shaved for the first time in several months. He then put on a new suit which had only recently been received, in consequence of a rush order which he had mailed the month before upon hearing that several white families were moving in on the other end of the district.

Brewster, too, produced from the folds of his bed a suit of clothes that was even better than the one he had

worn at the election dance the fall before. No pains were spared in the perfection of their toilets, for were they not to live up to their previous reputation for love making? Was it not their deliberate intention to stir the passions of those impressionable people? They intended to be the dominating factor at that baile.

Hardy had not returned when they left camp, but that did not matter, as he had not approved of their going and would not have accompanied them had he been there.

At about that time Hardy was dodging bullets in a very realistic manner. He had ridden to the top of the first range with Dennis, and on the way back had counted the last band of sheep,—one which had been missed before the roundup—and was riding along through a sagebrush draw in the foothills, when “whiz-z-z” went the whistle of a rifle bullet too close to his ears for comfort, quickly followed by the report of a rifle. A quick glance over his shoulder, a swift movement, and he straightened in his saddle, rifle in hand, horse half turned, ready to give battle. “Whiz-z-z” and another bullet sped past, and almost simultaneously the report of two rifles rang out, one of which was his own. Hardy fell headlong from his saddle into the thick sagebush.

He had succeeded in making one return shot, but only at the puff of smoke rising from a clump of boulders in the cliff at the side of the draw. It would have been foolish to have remained in the saddle and fought an invisible and entrenched foe.

The last bullet put a hole through one of his shirt sleeves and just grazed his bosom. That was close enough. He would play possum,—lie there in the sage and watch the cliff. Perhaps the would-be assassin would conclude that he had killed him and come out from his place of concealment, and thus afford him the opportunity for another return shot, which would be decisive.

When Hardy had fallen, his horse had of course become frightened and run away; but it was old Buck, and evidently, after thinking the matter over, he decided

to wait for his master, so he stopped and began to graze in the lower end of the draw.

Fearing that the bushwhacker might decide to drop a few bullets around the spot where he had fallen, just to insure a job well done, Hardy crawled cautiously along the ground under cover of the thick sagebrush, to get out of the exact place where he had fallen, all the time watching the ledge of rocks. If that greaser would just stick his head out for an instant, two might play at that little game of hide and seek!

It had not been over a minute since the first shot had been fired; but that had been long enough for Hardy to demonstrate that he did not always have to deliberate and ponder a matter in his mind before coming to a decision and taking action. He would wait there until the assassin came to dispose of the body of his victim. Then he would have an opportunity to get even. So, lying there under cover of the sagebrush, he pondered in his mind the events of the past few months—the warning from the old sheep herder, Martinez; the complaints submitted by Ortega against the rangers; the untimely and mysterious deaths of the prospector and the farmer; Brewster's experience of the day before. No. There was nothing unusual or unexpected about his present predicament or experience. He was just a lucky man, that was all.

Then he wondered how the boys would make it at the baile and rebuked himself for having opposed their going. They were surely as safe there as lying around the camp fire. Maybe the "Tom foolery" precautions taken the night before had served a double purpose. Blair's words about "crawling inter a holler log day times and a puttin' yer lights out o' nights" and "plumb losin' yer self-respect" recurred to him; and he thought half aloud: "This sneakin' around in the sagebrush ain't a right honorable way to meet a foe." But he had to admit to himself that it was the only practical way.

How he would like to pull that greaser out from behind the rocks and just "beat hell out of him"! But—

well! There was only one thing definitely certain, and that was that Ortega himself would have to answer personally for this indiscretion, and, voicing this decision aloud, "I'll learn the old devil to fight like a man, or I'll wipe up the earth with his dirty carcass", he settled down to his vigil.

Would that murderer come to view the remains, and hide the evidence?

Dusk was coming on. Old Buck had worked his way back toward the spot where Hardy had so suddenly and unceremoniously dismounted. Had Buck been thinking the matter over? Or was it just plain horse sense? "Hosses have lots o' hoss sense", as Blair often remarked. Was it the nature or instinct of a domesticated horse? Did he feel helpless and afraid there all alone with saddle and bridle, deserted by his master, and was he coming for protection?

Whatever may have been his motive, when the moon peeped over the horizon to silently witness the scene, he stood at the spot where Hardy had fallen, head lowered, waiting.

CHAPTER XV

A VERY MUCH ALIVE GHOST

It was not yet dark when the boys reached Cady's place. The chicken pull was nearly over, but, riding up at full speed, they made their presence known by knocking the Mexican ponies and riders out of the way with their big horses. Then they advanced toward the dance hall. At the door they dropped the bridle reins and dismounted. The only reason they did not ride right in was that the door was entirely too small.

The next instant they were at the bar exchanging jovial salutations—or rather jovially saluting everyone, as all were too suddenly and completely surprised and dumfounded to make any replies, jovial or otherwise.

Brewster was looking Cady full in the eye and ordering the drinks. Berger passed on to the musicians and bade them begin the music without delay. Blair was carefully depositing his cat and typewriter on the bar. They were in sacks, but he at once pulled out the cat and, delivering a toast in Mexican to its honor, bade everyone drink heartily, concluding with a second emphatic invitation, as he tossed a bill on the bar and raised his glass to his lips: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die."

Uncasing his typewriter, he described it to the Mexican bystanders as an infernal machine operated by magic which automatically recorded each and every thought of the cat. And to the cat he ascribed wonderful supernatural powers of intuition, claiming that the remarkable cat could divine the most secret thoughts of each and everyone within the range of its vision—and that neither darkness, adobe walls nor distance interrupted or obstructed its vision in the least.

Blair's Mexican was much better than his English.

He had no difficulty in commanding and holding the attention of his already hypnotized audience, and his eloquence improved as he lubricated his throat freely with the stimulating beverages which Cady lost no time in passing over the bar to him. He especially emphasized the fact that the infernal machine, under the subtle and magic influence of the cat, was particularly adapted to recording the last words of a dying man, the loving words of a señorita bonita, the faithless words of a false señora, and the grievous and brutal words of a jealous hombre.

Inserting a sheet of paper, he proceeded to give a visible demonstration with the machine, the cat on his shoulder rubbing against his face and purring its fiendish, magic dictation in his ears.

The first observation of the cat as recorded by the wonderful machine was: "In the hearts of certain of the señoritas bonitas, yea, even in the hearts of some of the señoras, there is a latent love for the gay Americanos, which will grow warm and gush forth in torrents free as the waters of a mountain stream; and in the hearts of the hombres there is already jealousy which will grow to a burning flame of hatred for the Gringos. Let all beware of the dire results of these passions!"

Berger had lost no time in getting the dance started, and soon that motley mob—a gay, fantastic throng—was gliding, bobbing, stamping with a rhythmic tread, all in perfect time with the weird music,—the brew for the intoxicating revelry that was to follow.

The same sparkling black eyes that had met Brewster's at the election dance were again looking into his and speaking with a silent eloquence, louder and more emphatic than the bass drum. A vivacious young woman loves a conquering young man. The fact that she had but recently become a bride did not enter into the consideration of either for the present. Brewster had fairly seized her, at sight, from the very embrace of her young husband.

Berger too had swung into step, holding close to his

breast one of the most bewitching of the fair señoritas. How her eyes sparkled! How red her lips! How soft her touch! Every movement of her lithe body, every vibration of her being, seemed in perfect accord with his, as they kept time with the enchanting music. She almost startled him by beginning to twitter in her own musically expressive tongue some little nothingnesses, yet lovelets.

The first dance over, Berger suddenly became conscious of other faces, and realized that he saw reflected something of what the cat had seen and recorded.

The noise of the dance had drowned out Blair's voice, but he had not been idle. With the cat on his shoulder, he had been passing through the crowd, completely ignoring the presence of the men, openly scrutinizing and admiring the women, showering his compliments—wine and cigarettes—upon all who met with his favor. Enlisting the services of Cady's prettiest and favored barmaid, he continued this good work, exciting all the wonder, superstition, admiration, love, jealousy, and hatred possible with his absurd mannerisms and the supernatural cat.

At the beginning of the second dance he turned to the pretty barmaid, and, bowing in his most humble and polite manner, in a way which he knew could not escape Cady's notice, he asked: "Even though I am unworthy to look upon your marvelous beauty, pray grant me the favor of the dance." And, as they caught step and entered the mad whirl, he immediately began pouring out, not lovelets, but rivers of love from the depths of his heart into her ears. Of all the beautiful women in the hall she was by far the most beautiful in face, figure, and charm of manner. Yes, of all the women that he had ever met in his world wanderings she was the loveliest of them all.

Begging her to forgive him, who was so unworthy for thus making bold to express to her the innermost secrets of his heart, he solemnly informed her that within him there was an irresistible force which prompted and com-

pelled him to speak the words "I love you", though knowing that he could not hope for reciprocation. Then fervently he emphasized his declaration by repetition: "I loved you the moment I met you; I love you now; I always shall love you with all my being, my pretty one."

To the cat all this must have sounded like the Latin conjugation of the verb "*Amo*",—I love—for Blair was now using his very best Castilian,—the language best adapted to love making and flattering phrases.

The dance over, he expressed his heartfelt gratitude for having been allowed to sip of such joy for so brief a space of time, and again bowed low and was off. The next dance he would repeat his little recitation to another. Before the evening was over he would probably become more proficient in an art that he found he had almost forgotten.

Rushing to his typewriter, he swiftly worked the keys, the cat playfully biting his ear and cuffing his curly locks. Then, jerking out the written sheet, he mounted a beer barrel and raised his hand for silence. The next dance was already forming, but at his gesture and a nod from Brewster, the music stopped and a profound silence fell over the assemblage. In a hushed tone Blair made known the ominous revelations of the cat: "The Devil has arrived. His Satanic Majesty and fiendish angels are now present, exerting their evil influence. Visible to the eyes of the cat are these things."

A murmur ran through the crowd that might have developed into a panic, but Blair again raised his hand, commanding attention, and in his most oratorical Spanish-Mexican suggested that His Satanic Majesty be made to feel welcome and at home; that he and his impish angels be invited to join in the dance, to love and be loved, to sip of the wine, yea, drink unto drunkenness and gorge at the feast; for was not this the season of gayety? Addressing the musicians, Blair bade them play the "Devil's Dream" in honor of His Satanic Majesty's presence.

Stationing himself directly in front of the musicians, he beat the measure with a beer bottle, leading them faster

and faster. The dance became more furious. The Devil no doubt began to feel at home. The revelry had begun. Anyone keeping step to the time of that old tune played at double quick has his faculties fully occupied. There was no time for evil forebodings.

There was a large crowd, this being the season of homecoming for the sheep herders, many of whom had been away from their families all winter, herding the sheep for their patron, the Mayor Domo. Many a young sheep herder came with the long premeditated intention and anticipation of dancing with the señorita whom he hoped to ask to be his wife. The custom of his people allowed him to dance with her and to speak to her of his love.

If she showed him favor, he might then ask a mutual friend of the two families to intercede for him and ask her parents for her hand in marriage. If this was agreeable to her parents, further arrangements would be quickly made for the marriage fiesta and baile at the groom's expense. He was also to furnish her with a trunk full of articles of feminine apparel. Then they were ready to keep house. Perhaps she would have to build the adobe house herself; possibly not. That would depend on their station and his habits of industry and thrift. There would be many such occasions throughout the summer.

But woe unto him who stepped between the young sheep herder and the señorita of whom he had thought and dreamed and planned all winter long in his lonely camp! There was surely a fine opportunity for the rangers to stir up trouble. The señorita in the case, all oblivious of the designs of her future sheep herder husband, might in the excitement of the revelry cast covetous and inviting glances at the hated Gringos. The Devil and all of his imps could then get busy. The time and the place were right.

In the rooms at the side of the dance hall there were card and dice games, with gambling in full swing. There were also other rooms where parties of lovers, too in-

fatuated and absorbed in each other to remain in the dance, might find seclusion for a brief season of bliss. In fact the whole house was open to the revelers. In the spacious dining room long tables were being spread for the midnight feast. At all times the bar was lined with thirsty hombres. Tom Cady, with a heavy six shooter hanging low on either side—for purposes of ornamentation perhaps—and sleeves rolled up, was busy as a bee passing out the “*spiritus frumenti*”, though one hand was partially incapacitated by a fresh and curiously exciting bandage. Many had already imbibed too freely.

At the end of each dance there was a rush for the bar for drinks to carry to the fair ones. Affairs of love or honor were often settled in a primitive manner, Brewster interfering just in time to avert actual murder; a knock-down and drag out,—most of the latter being done by the rangers,—and the dance was on again.

The mere fact that the dance was at “Cady’s Place” meant that it would not be attended by the best families. A few of the better class who had made the mistake of coming were now hurriedly leaving. Still, there would be a large crowd left and a lively one,—the lower and the lowest classes.

To have observed and described all of the happenings up to the hour of the feast would have overtaxed even the mystic powers of the cat—did overtax them, for later in the evening Blair gave up in despair, partly because he had so many little affairs of his own to look after, one in particular, which fully occupied his time and attention, greatly to the chagrin of Cady.

But even jealousy did not prompt Cady to make an open break. Many times he caught Blair casually watching him, but he had heard much of Blair’s dexterity with a six gun, and he did not have sufficient curiosity to prompt a demonstration. Then there was his promise to Brewster, and perhaps his gratitude. It was humiliating, but what chance had he to finish anything that he might start with one of the rangers, with two others in the room? Why think of it? What was the love of a pretty

bar-maid? Had he not experienced the love of many? There were others as pretty as she.

The Mexicans too had heard tales about the rangers' wonderful shooting, many of them highly exaggerated, and of their marvelous escapes and reckless disregard for life. Not the least of the factors which proved to them that the rangers were not to be trifled with was the supernatural cat and the typewriter, the like of which they had never before seen or heard. With many of them superstition is not only their "middle name", but their first and last as well.

The result was that no one opposed the rangers by word or act; in fact, great pains were taken by all, drunk or sober, not to incur their disfavor. The rangers were the recognized managers of the orgy, for such the affair became before it had far progressed.

Cady made no move to keep order. It was left entirely to the rangers, and by feast time many more had departed. Some had been dragged out and thrown down the steps, while others had been disarmed and thrown into an inner room that was kept bolted from the outside. Some were lying promiscuously about the place, having quietly and peacefully drunk themselves into sublime unconsciousness, partly because of their inclinations to satisfy their own natural appetites, and partly due to the ever ready and practical encouragement that Blair had unstintingly extended. Many of the fairer sex were included among this class.

Both Blair and Brewster had drunk enough to sharpen their wits and ingenuity. Berger was more insanely intoxicated by the excitement of the revelry, so what they could not think of by way of amusement was not worth the Devil's while. As the cat observed a little later: "The Devil wears a pleased smile on his face and is preparing to depart. He cannot think of any suggestions to make to add to the joy of the occasion, and feels that his presence is needed much more elsewhere. He thanks you one and all for the great pleasure which has been his at the party, for the lovely friendships that he has made,

and, feeling sure he will meet all in the near future, bids you adios."

Along in the wee hours, when the mule-riding caporal arrived and leaned over the bar and began talking in a subdued tone to Cady, the crowd had dwindled to a few conscious and semi-conscious survivors,—a selected few of the most lovely of the señoritas and señoras, the rangers and an occasional gallant young Mexican who had been permitted to remain in order to have a sufficient number to form the sets in the various dances.

Berger was dancing with the beautiful señora of the caporal,—the same having been the señorita over whom the caporal's jealousy had been excited the fall before, resulting in the severe jolt on his chin at the business end of Berger's long arm.

Upon recognizing her husband there had been a shrill shriek from the señora, and then she had nestled closer in Berger's arms—for protection perhaps. Who knows the emotions that might have been hers? She had come to the celebration that day with her brother and sister, expecting her husband to come early in the evening. But he had not come. Then the handsome Americans had smiled upon her, asked her to dance, and—can steel resist a magnet? She was only a natural human being,—half wild, half bred, still in her teens.

As the caporal talked with Cady and watched the dancers, his jet black eyes seemed to grow darker and darker and the lids closed closer and closer, until they formed mere narrow slits through which shone the insane passions of a jealous Mexican.

He was heavily armed, as became his position in the employ of the Mayor Domo. Was he talking to Cady about how he had "gotten" Hardy? How he had put one of the hated Gringos out of the way? If so, he was not thinking of it, for each time Berger and his señora passed by on that side of the hall his eyes became more threatening.

His lip was curling, showing a row of vicious, ivory white teeth. He was watching Berger and the other

rangers as a cat watches a mouse. But he had not been unobserved by them, for this was the psychological moment at which Blair interfered. He was looking squarely into the fiendish slits of those eyes, politely offering a chair and bidding the caporal to be seated.

There was a hesitancy—a full minute during which they looked each other in the eye. The dancers stopped and stood with bated breath, and still Blair and the caporal were in the same position, neither moving so much as an eyelash.

The music stopped! It was silent as a tomb there in that hall of noisy riotous revelry. Then those slits began to widen; the expression of those black, passive, charged orbs began to change. He was weakening. He had read something in the blue eyes of that white man that was changing his emotions. He was afraid!

Blair slowly extended his hand and pointed a finger toward the chair, and the caporal limply sat down.

Blair did not disarm him, but simply smiled, turned around and bade the musicians play the "Devil's Dream". There the caporal sat and witnessed the dance until the break of day, when Blair marched him outside and bade him mount his mule and ride home.

All night long the rangers' horses had stood outside the door where the reins had been so unceremoniously dropped, heads together, watching for their masters. No one molested them. Blair and Brewster had their whole string of horses with them. They were on the way back to their districts to catch up with their regular work of enforcing the regulations—carrying out the aims of the Government there in that wilderness.

An hour later they were in camp waiting for breakfast to cook. Brewster and Blair had unsaddled and unpacked all of the horses but three. Brewster had then taken off his clothes and enjoyed a souse in the creek, "just to stimulate his faculties", he said; but Blair and Berger had been satisfied with bathing only their faces and hands in the cold mountain spring water.

"Well, there weren't any murders, were there, Blair?" Brewster jokingly remarked as they started to eat.

"As usual, Brewster, ye've thought o' the one thing possible fer ye to say. Murder was the only thing what wasn't perpetrated—an' I 'spect it would be a tolerable good bet that there will be a right smart lot of 'em as a direct consequence o' that thar baile sometime within the next twenty years. Ye know when a greaser or Injin gets mad, there's a kind o' steady growth o' kantan-perniciousness that forms around his dirty heart an' keeps a gettin' more aggravatin' till he up an' kills somebody as a consequence of"—

"How about their other passions? Love for instance? Does that grow in the same way?" Berger asked.

"If ye keep up yer present pace, Berger, ye'll be plumb competent to write a treatise on that thar subject yerself. Right at the present moment I must confess with shame that I don't feel right competent to give ye any edifyin' enlightenment on the subject."

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Breakfast over, Blair climbed a dead cedar stub and tacked the American flag at its very tip. Then he came down part way for Berger to hand him a saddle blanket, his typewriter, and the cat, and, making a cozy resting place for them with his blankets across a couple of broken limbs, he bade Juan remain there on the lookout while all took a little snooze. With their horses saddled and arranged in a triangle about them, the rangers rolled out their beds at the foot of the tree and were soon fast asleep.

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In the placeta there was great excitement. Quite a crowd had gathered, and more were arriving,—stragglers from the baile, many showing marked signs of their dissipation. Families were reuniting, sometimes joyfully, but as often otherwise,—in a quarrelsome mood with a grievance to settle,—a "kantankerousness" of heart, as Blair would have put it. All were thoroughly aroused and incensed against the rangers, the hated Gringos. The

prophecy of the cat had been fulfilled—or rather was being fulfilled, for there was much to follow.

In the main office of the Mayor Domo the caporal was boastfully reporting the killing of Hardy the day before. Old Ortega was listening attentively, but with a sceptical cynicism on his face that greatly puzzled the caporal. Why was his patron not pleased? Had it not been his wish, his order?

But there was surely no pleasure registered in Ortega's look; rather disgust, contempt. The caporal had ended his boasting and stood nervously fumbling the sombrero in his hands. His eyes were shifting now—he was withering before the scornful stare of his master.

It seemed to him an age before Ortega finally spoke: "I do not believe you, my caporal. You have failed so many times, I cannot believe you. Your eye is false, and your tongue a coward's. Well you know the penalty to one who dares to deceive me. Speak again! I command you! Is it true? Is the ranger dead?"

"It is true, Patron. I shot him through the heart; he fell from his horse and never moved again. I watched him die with my own eyes—watched him until the sun went down—as I would watch a snake die. He is dead, Patron. To-day I go to dispose of the body."

"Dispose of the body of that dirty Gringo? Let the sun cook his swiny flesh, the coyotes tear him into whips, the buzzards pick his bones. Go, you cowardly dog! Make better use of your time—kill another pig of a Gringo!"

"Yes, Patron. I will make haste to do your bidding. But pray be merciful; do not rebuke me. For have I not always been faithful? Have I not obeyed your commands?"

"Be merciful! Rebuke you! You, with the heart of a lizard, and blood of water! Am I a fool? Do you think you can deceive me with your oily tongue? With your half lies, half truths? You tell of your bravery, nothing of your cowardice. Do you think all of my people are false like you? That I do not know? Since

the rising of the sun have I listened to their tales of your cowardice—yours and Cady's. Of Cady it is what might be expected. He is only a Gringo, but *you?*"

Ortega hesitated for words to express his disgust, but what he lacked in words he made up in terribleness of manner and facial expression: "Your sheep herders, the peons in your camps, despise you. They are ashamed of you. They plead with me to give them another caporal,—one with a brave heart and red blood. Are my people to be herded in bands like sheep by these tyrannous rangers? Is the greed of the Gringo going to take our lands, our flocks, our homes, our women?—all because of the cowardice of you and Cady,—sulking curs, coyotes of men? No! It shall not be! Now go! I command you! And do not again darken my door or dare to speak to me with your treacherous tongue until the last Gringo is killed! Then you may come and be my caporal."

Trembling before the withering torrent of his patron's wrath, the caporal bowed low and humbly, as he backed out through the door into the storeroom, Ortega slamming it in his face.

Ortega was insane with frenzy. But not that alone had prompted his acts. There had also been shrewd calculation. All morning, while listening to the complaints of his people, and even while dealing with the caporal, he had been going over the situation in his mind. One ranger was dead. Now the others must be put out of the way without delay. The iron must be struck while hot.

After the flagrant misconduct of the rangers the night before he reasoned that the killing, if questioned, would be justified, even by a high Federal Court. Their deaths could be easily explained. Their own acts had brought upon them the wrath of a peaceable people, the righteous wrath which had compelled them to strike a blow in self-defense. He would pose before the court as being unable to control his people when so greatly excited. The greatest harm that could come would be the conviction

of the caporal, as it would be impossible to prove his own implication. There had been no witnesses when he gave the caporal his orders, and the rangers would all be dead and could tell no tales.

No! He need have no fear of the consequences. The difficulty was, as it had always been, to get the rangers killed. Like the mice that in conference voted to have a bell put on the cat, no one volunteered to do the act. Unless someone volunteered or could be persuaded to kill the rangers, his whole plan would fail. All his people were afraid. Cady had failed him.

The caporal was his hope. He had killed one ranger,—the most dreaded. He was insanely jealous of another; a third had humiliated him before a crowd,—had made his own peons ashamed of him, had excited his desire for revenge. He was a character who, in desperation, might be excited to terrible acts. He was the available tool. Therefore Ortega had purposely rebuked him, threatened him with the loss of his prized position of caporal—in fact had put a price upon it—goaded him on, hoping to excite him to desperation, the desperation that would result in the rangers' deaths.

While the crimes were being committed he would be absent in the capital, exerting his influence in other channels. He would have Cady drive him to the railroad at once. On the way he might induce Cady to try again. Perhaps gold would influence him; he was only a Gringo. He would pay his price. The cards had been dealt; he knew what he held in his hand; the stakes were high; the game must be played!

As he turned from slamming the door in the face of the caporal, he came suddenly upon an apparition, for on the opposite side of the room stood the dead ranger. In his heated excitement in dismissing the caporal he had been completely oblivious to all earthly things, including the front door, through which Hardy had entered. Bolt-ing it behind him, he had listened to the last sentences pronounced in the caporal's dismissal, and now stood with

a mixture of unfeigned amusement and righteous indignation plainly expressed in the lines of his honest, weather-beaten face.

For an instant Ortega was too startled to move, but for only an instant; and he sprang for his gun which now, as always, lay within easy reach on his desk. But before his hand reached it he was conscious of being confronted with an insurmountable barrier,—Hardy's ".45" thrust squarely in his face; and, as he looked over that barrel from the wrong end into Hardy's eyes, he saw something that caused him to almost relinquish hope.

Hardy was now speaking in that deliberate, sarcastic drawl: "By the way you was a jumpin' for that gun, I reckon you was about to commit suicide. Most awful glad I got here in time to save your life."

The accent in Hardy's voice now changed from sarcasm to earnestness, as he threw his gun down on the desk with a crash: "Specially as I have a little personal matter to settle with you. Just peal your coat and get ready to protect yourself; for I jist dropped in to beat hell out of you fer puttin' them bullet holes in my shirt yesterday!"

Hardy's eyes were flashing fire now. And, as he raised his hand to show the holes in his shirt sleeve, he reached out with a quick thrust and delivered a smart slap, flat handed, on Ortega's cheek.

"Pull your coat, I tell you! I will give you time to get ready to fight. But be damned quick about it, for I'm a gettin' in a hurry!"

Ortega did not peal his coat, but dropped back a pace: "Have a care! One shout from me and I will have assistance."

But Hardy was advancing too fast to give him time to shout. Another slap on the cheek and Ortega dropped to his knees.

"Have mercy! I pray, have mercy! I am not your physical equal. Have mercy! I did not shoot at you! Pray do not smite me!"

Hardy was dumfounded at this display of cowardice.

Still infuriated, he stood and looked at the cowering object before him.

"No! You didn't shoot at me. You're too big a coward. You just ordered me killed."

"Oh, there is some great mistake, Mr. Hardy. I fear you have been listening to the tales of my enemies. Pray do not hold me responsible for the acts of others. I counsel with my people not to commit rash acts."

"You was a counselin' that dirty black devil that was a backin' out the door as I came in all right. Reckon that's a fair sample o' your counselin'." As Hardy said this he again sprang forward and administered a harder slap than before.

"Stand up, I tell you, and fight like a man!"

Ortega had not till then realized that Hardy had understood what he had said to the caporal, as it had been spoken in Mexican. He had been caught at his little game. But he had no intention of standing up and fighting like a man. It was not in his nature. He would beg for mercy, parry for time; perhaps some one would come to his rescue.

Hardy, now completely disgusted, administered slap after slap with both hands. Ortega covered his face as best he could with his hands and continued to plead for mercy. He seemed so defenseless that Hardy could not find it in his heart to strike a decisive blow,—he had not come to kill him,—and finally stopped his slapping and stood back and looked upon the object of his wrath. Scorn, disgust, and disappointment plainly expressed themselves on his countenance.

"Reckon it's just what could be expected from you. Your father was hung as a common hoss thief, and your mother was a camp follower—just common public property. There's no tryin' to get around the workin's o' Nature. A man or a hoss,—any animal, even a low sneak of a greaser like you—is a kind o' chemical product,—a product o' their ancestry and surroundin's. A hoss thief, and a camp follower, an' the bringin' up of a fugitive!

Yes, you're just what could be expected—just the natural result o' the combination.

"But, hell! you can learn somethin'; an' I'm here to bring that influence to bear—to extend a liberal education." And in another burst of rage, he again advanced to administer more slaps by way of emphasis.

Ortega had now made up his mind that Hardy did not intend to kill him, and his tactics were saving him from a more severe chastisement. But Hardy's reference to his forbears had been the greatest insult that could be given, and his resentment almost overcame his discretion. He tried to rise.

"Have a care! Do not insult my parents!"

"Stand up! Pull your coat and fight then, if you have an ounce of good blood in your veins! Stand up and fight like a man!"

Hardy's eagerness was unfeigned and altogether too apparent. Ortega was not the man to meet his challenge. It was not his way to fight. And he dropped back to his knees and again began to plead. Hardy just stood, looked, and marveled. When he spoke, it was in a different tone.

"Get up! Go over there and sit down in your easy chair. You couldn't fight like a man, because you are not a man. . . . And while I think of it, there was a bunch o' white folks a campin' up on the creek this mornin', when I came along. They was a lookin' fer a place to settle an' make their homes. So I clipped the wires on your pasture fence and told 'em to drive right in an' look it over, that it was all public land; an' if they found a place that looked good to 'em, to just come to me an' I would make out their application papers for homesteads. An' that's partly why I dropped in this mornin' to tell you that, if anything happened to any o' them folks, you will be held personally responsible for it. An' I'll come and give ye the thrashin' that I intended to give you this mornin'.

"Furthermore, Mr. Ortega,"—the Mister was in a most scornful sarcasm, but there could be no doubt as to the sincerity of Hardy's general statement,—"if you don't

cut out this killin' business an' near killin', I'm a goin' to see that you get a chance to defend yourself before a Federal Court—give you another chance to fight like a man. Reckon you an' me understand each other."

Hardy picked up his six shooter and stepped out. The plaza was deserted—not a living being in sight. The people had witnessed Hardy ride through the placeta gate at full speed straight for the Mayor Domo's office,—looking neither to the right nor the left,—dismount, and fairly burst through the door without stopping to knock. Then two minutes later they had also seen the caporal mounted on his mule, face ashen yellow with fright, fairly flee out through the gate and on down the road, never even so much as glancing back. This was surely enough to excite suspicion—a vague apprehension that something rather unusual was happening.

Had the collective intuition of that restless, wrangling crowd prompted them to "vamose"? At any rate they were gone,—dispersed in all directions, hurriedly making their way toward their respective homes.

Hardy rode leisurely out through the gate, disappointed—disappointed that Ortega would not fight.

Old Ortega sat in his chair dumfounded. Never before had any man dared to enter his office unannounced, to say nothing of the insults. His face was still smarting from the slaps. He was not ashamed of having refused Hardy's challenge to fight. He had handled the situation in the only way possible for him. But he keenly resented the insults. Instead of squelching him, they had goaded. He, too, was a character who could be goaded to desperation and to commit acts without discretion.

Springing to his feet, he rapped on the door leading to the store department. One of his faithful peons appeared.

"Go and get Tom Cady at once!"

With that he paced the floor, his facial expression becoming fiercer and fiercer,—as had the caporal's at the dance. His eyelids closed closer and closer until they formed only narrow slits through which shone the insane, revengeful passions of an angered Mexican.

CHAPTER XVI

TRYING OUT THE WEST

The day before Old Mack returned from his trip Mr. Ensley—the inspector whom he had asked his superiors to have sent from the central office to investigate conditions on the Forest—arrived. Alfred Ensley was an Eastern man making his first trip through the West, and, like many whose ideas of Western ways have been secured second hand, he had made a special effort to dress in a manner fitting for such an expedition.

His new riding pants and tan puttees were fairly dazzling. Under his coat of a nationally known make he wore a leather vest, and strapped around him, so as to create a striking resemblance to Buster Brown, was a cartridge belt. In its holster was a pearl handled six shooter that had never been used. His stiff white linen collar and white shirt were immaculate but scarcely less conspicuous than the red silk handkerchief which hung coquettishly around his neck.

To top off the picturesque costume he wore a soft felt hat with two pigeon feathers stuck in the band. This outfit, which emphatically disproved Kipling's assertion: "The East is East, and the West is West, And never the twain shall meet", together with a pair of tortoise shell glasses and a riding cane hung on his wrist, nearly upset the dignity of Mack's office. The deputy, who was no authority on Eastern styles, but who had spent considerable time in the West, could scarcely suppress his laughter as Mr. Ensley came in the door, bearing himself as though he owned the earth and expected everyone to bow at his approach.

Though extremely polite and gentlemanly, the inspector's attitude showed that he expected the complaints to be true. Before he had been in the office an hour he had

very diplomatically confided to the deputy that no doubt the quickest and most practical solution to the whole matter would be to remove the men against whom complaints had been filed—including of course the Supervisor—cleverly implying that the deputy would then be in line for promotion.

This greatly amused the deputy, who had other ideas about disposing of Old Mack so easily. He showed the inspector every courtesy possible, and explained the general workings of the Forest, though on the subject under consideration he gave no detailed report. The inspector showed only casual interest, and decided to wait for Old Mack, whom the deputy informed him would probably return the following day.

So he secured a room at the only hotel in town and after supper paraded up and down the main street, causing considerable amusement for the people who were sitting on the doorsteps conversing in the twilight, as they concluded immediately that he had never seen the West before.

The next day he alternately walked up and down the street and sat in Mack's office with his feet on the desk. About three thirty in the afternoon, when he had tired of sitting in the office and was just starting out upon the street again, Mack appeared on the scene.

Ignorant of Western ways and customs as the inspector appeared to be, he at once recognized Old Mack. Something in his bearing spotted him, causing the inspector to look twice, even though his badge, serving as a pencil holder inside his shirt pocket could not have been discerned from the sidewalk, and no part of his uniform showed, as his coat was tied behind the saddle cantle, and his chaps covered his pants.

The recognition was mutual, Old Mack having observed the inspector, taken a second look, chuckled to himself, and reined in toward the sidewalk. The inspector stood watching him much as a naturalist would inspect a new specimen. Mack had been riding since daylight, and, as there had been rain back in the hills

the night before, he and his horses were covered with mud. He had not shaved for nearly a week, and his shirt was torn where he had caught it on some brush when climbing a bank out of a stream he had had to ford. Altogether his appearance was a decided contrast to that of the inspector with his polished puttees and shoes.

Old Mack dismounted and, approaching, addressed the inspector in a respectful tone: "You are the inspector we've been looking for, I take it"; and, extending his hand, added: "Glad to see you. I am Mackensey."

What the inspector's thoughts may have been at being thus identified could not have been discovered from the expression on his face, many years of training having taught that part of his anatomy—even the mouth in conversation—to serve more often as a mask than as a reflector of his thoughts. This his business required. Though from all outward appearance his eyes plainly expressed inquisitiveness, and his whole manner and bearing that of a superior being carefully observing, analyzing, studying one of a lower order, it would have been difficult to have guessed his conclusions.

There was no warmth in his handshake, and his words were fairly iced: "I am Inspector Ensley"; and, without returning or even appearing to notice Old Mack's pleasant smile, and with no pretense at being "pleased" or "glad" to have met him, he continued in the same frigid, matter-of-fact tone: "I have already nearly completed my investigation."

Old Mack was now studying the inspector, and his face was not a mask either. That pleasant smile had changed to a humorous grin.

The inspector looked at his watch and continued: "I shall leave on the five twenty train. However, I have a few questions that I shall require you to answer. Will you return to the office with me, Mr. Mackensey? I shall not take much of your time." The last was said with the air of one who would soon have a disagreeable or insignificant task over with.

Mack was tired, but, when Mr. Ensley showed such a superior manner, he stopped for no formalities and invited the inspector to return to the office. After washing his hands and face they proceeded to talk business at once.

Emphatically denying the charges as a whole, Mack told Mr. Ensley that they had been instigated by a trespasser. He then related the conditions under which the rangers had been working and brought out the map that Berger had submitted, which by this time was very complete. He told him about the roundup and the number of stock for which Ortega had refused to obtain grazing permits, and of the trespass case that he was about to file against Ortega.

Mr. Ensley, however, remained unconvinced, holding to his belief that the rangers had done many of the things of which they had been accused. He could not comprehend how such a condition as Mack described could exist on a Forest properly supervised and administered. He wound up by stating frankly: "I consider the principal cause of the present chaotic state of affairs on this Forest to be rank inefficiency on the part of its Rangers and their Supervisor."

There had been an emphasis on the word "Supervisor" that may have provoked the little smile around the corners of Old Mack's mouth, and, as he leaned back in his chair and stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, that little smile grew to a fighting grin. The inspector caught a gleam of steel in Old Mack's eye. Then the grin changed to a merry laugh and Old Mack's eyes fairly bubbled over with merriment.

Mr. Ensley was puzzled. He was catching glimpses of Old Mack's character. Was this backwoodsman laughing at him? Jumping to his feet he indignantly demanded: "What's the great joke?"

Again Old Mack's merry laugh rang out, loudly and heartily. Then it was replaced by a quiet little smile,—his eyes playing over the inspector as though to size him up,—as he casually replied in a most humorous tone: "I was just thinking about 'inefficiency'. It's no joke."

For fully a minute they stood looking each other in the eye. Then suddenly changing his tone of voice, facial expression, and manner to one of intense seriousness, with a kindly smile, Old Mack pointed to the inspector's chair and said: "Sit down."

Mr. Ensley could not have told why he obeyed, but he did. And when Old Mack began to speak, he commanded the inspector's whole attention: "There are two men in the United States—very prominent men—who are so far above political influence that I can rely absolutely upon them to support me when the facts are laid before them."

"What do you mean? Who are these men?"

"They are the Chief Forester and the President. They believe in the principles as set forth by the Forestry Regulations which I am trying to enforce. They also believe in a square deal. If you fail to get the facts and present them, I shall still feel it my duty to do so through other channels. I ask you to make a thorough field investigation."

Furious, Mr. Ensley chewed his cigar, drummed on the desk with his fingers, and tried to stare Old Mack out of countenance. But Old Mack sat back, thumbs tucked in the armholes of his vest, smiling. Like Old Mack, Mr. Ensley was a veteran well versed in the political game; but he was also well aware that, through the sympathetic support of a Chief Executive who knew the West thoroughly and who was an enthusiastic conservationist, the forestry movement was finding new life and stability. Back of all the political intrigue, maze of formalities, and entanglements of red tape, there was something tangible. A steadfastness of well defined purpose had forcibly asserted itself. In Old Mack he saw a reflection of this purpose that was everywhere having a hard fight against opposing interests.

But that was not all. Old Mack had presented some statements in his arguments that would render any report that might be made by the inspector of no value unless

he obtained further evidence to substantiate the conclusions he had drawn.

"I'll go into the field with you," snapped the inspector finally, in the tone of a threat, as he seized his hat. "We will start early in the morning. My time is limited." He then stalked out of the office with the air of one greatly insulted.

Following this conference, Mack called his deputy, and with him went over the business that had accumulated during his absence. It was late in the night before he finished, but, as the inspector's "time was limited", it had to be done so that they could start in the morning.

Seldom carrying his investigations farther than the field offices, Mr. Ensley had never experienced out-of-door life such as the rangers led; nor had he studied the Forests from that point of view, and had little realization of what he was about to encounter. He had no idea there was such a place in the United States as that to which he was starting, although Old Mack had described it to him.

Early the next morning they were on their way. Traveling through the shady pines in the crisp mountain air was delightful. Before noon, however, the saddle became uncomfortable, and toward evening all but unbearable. When Old Mack finally called a halt, with the announcement "We'll camp here", the inspector slowly and painfully dismounted. He found he could hardly stand, as his legs were stiff and stubbornly insisted upon assuming the contour of the saddle. The day had been a hard one. He was tired.

Noticing this, Mack did the work of cooking and putting things in shape for the night. Then they sat by the camp-fire, Mack reciting his experiences in the wilds of the West.

Now and then, as Mack was relating these stories, some unfamiliar sound would come from the darkness, and the inspector would ask Mack what it was. On one occasion it happened to be the cry of a bobcat. After telling the inspector what it was, Mack went on to tell him of an experience he had had one night. He was

returning to camp after dark, and, as he rode along on horseback, passed under a low hanging pine tree. All at once he heard the startled cry of a bobcat, and at the same instant felt its claws digging into the back of his coat as it leaped upon his shoulders from the branches above.

Then followed a detailed recital of how he had fought it out with the cat on the back of his runaway horse—and how pleased his wife had later been with the rug that he had made from the cat's skin.

He also told the inspector of an experience he had had with a mountain lion when deer hunting. Just before dark he had shot a fine young buck, and dragged it by rope and saddle horn a quarter of a mile or more to a sheltered spot under a cliff of rocks, where he had skinned and dressed it, hanging the meat in the branches of a tree. He had then made his camp for the night under the ledge of rocks.

After the fire had died down he had suddenly awakened at the frightened snort of his horse, and found a mountain lion crouching on the ledge of rock above looking down at him. Needless to say, he instantly reached for his six shooter and shot the lion, which leaped into the air and fell dead at his feet.

As a result of these stories, when they finally decided it was time to go to bed, the inspector wanted to keep a fire burning all night to keep away the wild animals, but Mack persuaded him that it was not necessary. It was the first time, however, that the inspector had ever slept on the ground, and he found it pretty hard. Several times during the night he arose to rest himself. Each time he would pile wood upon the fire and dig around under his blankets to get the little pebbles or sticks that happened to be punching him in the ribs.

The next morning when dressing, he put on his puttees with the buckles on the inside of the leg. This caused them to rub on his saddle, and by night he was sorer than ever. Having met no one on the trail all day, he began to think it really was a wilderness indeed.

All day they passed through Englemann spruce timber

on one of the mountain passes. The trail was narrow and poor. Evening, however, found them riding across Hamilton's meadow. When they dropped into this little mountain park in which Hamilton had built his home, it came as quite a surprise to the inspector, who remarked that he had not dreamed of finding such a cozy little place out in that wilderness. To him it looked as good as the Waldorf Astoria hotel could have looked.

The log house had several well built rooms. There were also good stables and cultivated fields. And in the meadows grazed a herd of sleek milk cows and the usual horses, goats, and beef cattle that are seen in such a country.

As the men drew near, a pack of hunting dogs came running out, barking and making a great commotion. The half-breed children who were playing near the house scurried for shelter like a brood of partridges, peeking out around the edge of the buildings to learn who the newcomers might be. Only one or two of the older ones remained out to meet the strangers.

Hearing the dogs barking, a white man came out from the house and called them off. A Mexican woman also came hurrying out, but, seeing the white men, she as quickly hurried back into the house.

Approaching, Mack introduced the inspector. Hamilton greeted them very courteously and invited them into the house, instructing two of the older boys to take their horses to the barn and care for them. He straightway made the visitors at home,—more by his manner than by what he said.

If Mr. Ensley had been surprised to see this little isolated farm out there among those high mountains, he was astonished to meet a man of such culture. Hamilton used good English. There was a little twang in his accent which showed that he had at one time lived in Boston. A misplaced "h" and an omitted "r" now and then also suggested English descent. As many of the early settlers in the West had done, he had taken a native wife.



"They dropped into a little mountain park in which Hamilton had built his home."

When the boys had put up the horses and returned to the house, Hamilton introduced them and his full-blooded Mexican wife to the visitors. They then entered the large dining room and sat down to supper. The "chili con carne" was unpleasantly hot for the inspector's tongue, but his keen appetite compensated. Hamilton seemed greatly pleased to meet a man from the East, and he asked many questions about scenes that had once been familiar. He said he had been born in England, but had come to the United States in his early teens and had been educated in Boston. He had left Boston about thirty years before and drifted out West in search of gold and adventure. He was now sixty.

He very cleverly skipped the chapter in his life which would have disclosed the cause of his severing all relationship with his old friends and the old life, and seeking this secluded spot to spend the rest of his days. There had been a reason for his leaving the cultured life with its congenial surroundings, to which he had been accustomed; but love scars of the heart man does not expose.

So skillfully did he direct the conversation that before the supper hour was over the inspector felt entirely at home. As they withdrew to the living room, he decided that this would be an opportune time to learn more about the country and the work for which he had come, so he began to ask Mr. Hamilton questions.

To avoid the impression of eavesdropping, Mack moved over to the other end of the room and started a discussion with the boys about the hunting and fishing in the valley. They carried on their conversation in Spanish, as the boys seemed better able to speak it than English and used it with less embarrassment.

Soon Mr. Ensley drifted into Forest work, and Hamilton became very confidential, telling him he hoped to see conditions remedied. Further, he volunteered to give Mr. Ensley all the information he wanted on the subject. This, of course, was just what the inspector desired, and he asked if he could take notes in regard to their conversation. Hamilton consented; but he cautioned Mr.

Ensley, not to use his name in connection with them, as he was afraid that what he said might reach Ortega and cost him his life.

"You will readily comprehend, Mista Hensley," began Hamilton, "that my information comes from a 'ighly creditable and reliable source. I 'ave 'ad an exceedingly good hoppersportunity to learn the hoccurrences in Ortega's bailiwick, and the methods employed by 'im to maintain 'is complete dominion and to exclude intrudas, not only from pusal hobervation, but also through relatives of my wife,—the Matinez family—who live in that vicinity and who occasionally pay us a visit.

"There 'ave been many significant hincidents, but doubtless you are most hinterested in those subsequent to the hestablishment of the Forest Reserve. As you will recollect, the first rangas to be happointed were two recently discharged soldiers, Caspa and Thorne. They were likely chaps, but they started on the wrong foot. In the end one of them was nearly hassassinated whilst the otha was thrown in jail and escaped by cutting his way hout with a scythe. It was the manifest hintention to kill both of them the same night, and the first Tom Cady had hassaulted and left for dead."

"Indeed," said Mr. Ensley, feeling a creeping sensation at the roots of his hair, "who may this Mr. Cady be."

"It would be 'ard to identify 'im higzactly," Hamilton replied. "As far as is publicly known in this district, 'e is simply a gun man and a fugitive from justice whom Ortega himported during the range wars. 'E 'as a reputation for being decidedly foward with 'is firearms, and I consida it greatly to the credit of the present rangas that they 'ave been able to avoid an open conflict with 'im.

"It seems they 'ave the keen hinsight to foresee his every move and circumvent it heffectively. They 'ave also shown great henergy in dealing with Ortega and 'is subjects, and several attempts to hassassinate them 'ave ended in disasta to the hintended murderas."

"Have there then really been attempts to kill the rangers?" inquired Mr. Ensley with increasing concern.

"Indeed so," replied Hamilton. "I could recount a numba of hinstances. Why, Hardy 'ad not been in the country mo'e than a fortnight befo'e one of Ortega's men, who was considad a sure killer, came home one day on his donkey, with 'is features all disfigured from the beating 'e 'ad received at Hardy's 'ands. 'E did not explain the circumstances, but the curiosity of the 'orders 'ad been aroused, and they tracked 'is mule back to Hardy's camp. Of course the hobvious conclusion is that 'e had gone there to kill Hardy.

"Berger also 'ad an hencounta with a Mexican sheep 'erder at a public dance shortly afta 'is arrival. The fellow tried to kill 'im with a knife, but the youth was too quick for 'im and laid 'im out cold.

"Within the past week one of Ortega's 'enchmen shot at Hardy, and he fell off 'is 'oss into the brush, apparently dead. To havoid a completion of the act 'e 'ad to lie in the brush all day, but the next day 'e came out as bold as ever. The Mexicans are becoming supastitious about 'im."

This account was making a deep impression on the receptive mind of Mr. Ensley, and he started to comment, but words seemed to fail him.

After pausing for a moment Hamilton continued: "There was a little fracas the otha day that might 'ave 'ad a fatal ending. Tom Cady set out to waylay Brewsta, and 'e selected a very precipitous point on a little used trail. Though 'e 'ad every hadvantage in 'is fava 'e was no match for Brewsta, who 'as the faculty of thinking and hacting like thundabolt.

"Anyone helse would 'ave taken revenge for such an hundahanded attack, but Brewsta put Cady on 'is 'oss and sent 'im 'ome without any act of violence. Futha-more, 'e appears to 'ave fogotten the incident; at least no mention of it 'as since been made even in camp. My infomation again comes from a reliable source, namely,

one of my wife's kinsfolk who, knowing Cady's hintention, 'ad secretly followed 'im and witnessed the whole hincident. 'E also saw the return of the ranga to the camp. It is perfectly astounding to see the fobearance hexhibited by these custodians of the Forests.

"It 'as been an hadmirable lesson to the Mexicans to 'ave these rangas in their midst. They do not often 'ave such a demonstration of roping and riding and shooting, and above hall of self-reliance, and they are coming to feel a genuine respect for the white men, Ortega to the contrary notwithstanding. I compliment you most 'ighly, Mista Hensley, on your fothought in the selection of such men." (As though the inspector had been concerned in their selection.)

"This same relative of my wife's to whom I 'ave already referred, went to Hardy and warned 'im that 'e was a marked man. Can you himagine 'is reply? Just, 'Thank you very much. I am working fo' Uncle Sam, and if I am killed, a betta man will be sent to take my place.' Such heroism is true to the best traditions of the conquerors of the past.

"I must now beg of you, Mista Hensley, to keep this hincident a secret, as it might endanga my life, as well as that of Mr. Matinez, should it become known. For the same reason, I shall ask you to treat our whole conversation as confidential."

Mr. Ensley remained silent for a few moments, following the conclusion of this account. He was evidently trying to convince himself that there was some mistake about what he had just heard. Finally he asked: "I can see why Ortega might feel some antagonism toward the white people, and try to rid himself of them, but why should he wish to kill the people of his own race?"

"That is an old story," answered Mr. Hamilton, "and to hunderstand it you must rememba that at one time this country belonged to Mexico, and it is still thoroughly himbued with the same characteristics and customs. It is the nature of the people to form conspiracies or plots for some purpose or otha, and the whole life of the country

is one band of hinsurrectos, or revolutionists, afta anotha.

"Ortega was the 'ead of one band, whilst the fatha of Mr. Matinez was the leada of anotha. The contest was somewhat hunequal, and in one of the frequent clashes Mr. Matinez's fatha was killed. Hassassination disposed of the otha membas of the opposing band who were feared. The methods whereby Ortega first obtained 'is powa 'e 'as found most heffective in maintaining 'is position. Anyone who becomes the object of 'is wrath may beware.

"Just at present youa Government is the one who is hencroaching upon 'is domain, and naturally 'is fury is directed against its representatives in the form of the forest rangas. Many men who 'ave hoffended 'im much less than these 'ave been done away with.

"Now you will find a somewhat different situation on Mista Blair's range. There are the same feuds and clans, but the family in powa is so lenient that some of its subjects 'ave horganized marauding bands and robbed and plundad, as was the custom of their hancestors back in Old Mexico.

"In spite of this bad situation, Mista Blair 'as been very successful in havoiding trouble. The superstitious Mexicans think 'e 'as a chamed life and fea 'im as they would a spirit. Some time ago 'e 'appened to 'ave incurred the disfava of one of the bands of desperados, and they very promptly decided to get rid of 'im. One evening, as 'e was riding down a mountain trail, they shot at 'im from a distance. Whilst they failed to 'it 'im, the bullets whizzed so close to 'is ears that the haverage chap would 'ave 'eaded for the tall timba. Mista Blair, howeva, just looked around with a little surprise and hannoyance showing on 'is face, and finding no one in sight, 'e nonchalantly dismounted, and, with the shooting still continuing, 'e set 'is gun against a tree, unpacked 'is pack 'oss, and took 'is pet cat from the sack and set it on a fallen log. Then 'e set out 'is typewriter, put in some papa, and began to write.

"The Mexicans continued their fusillade and could not

hundastand why they did not 'it 'im, but hevidently the effect of a man deliberately making camp hunda such conditions had so hunnerved them that they could not 'ave 'it the broad side of a barn. Finally they became thoroughly frightened and ran away.

"The next hassassin they sent aifta 'im neva returned, and that took the daring out of them. They began to think not only that 'e 'ad a chamed life, but that 'e was dangerous as well. Mista Blair hunderstands the Mexican people perfectly and is on hexcellent terms with the betta classes. . . . Well, is there any otha hinformation that Hi can give you?"

Before replying Mr. Ensley stopped to read over his notes. When he concluded the examination, he said: "It looks to me as though they had been trying to kill all of the rangers over this way except Dennis. How about him?"

Hamilton sat back and laughed. "'E's pufectly 'armless, so there is no reason for doing 'im hany hinjury. The Mexicans all fea 'im, not because of 'is wild nature or skill with a gun, but on haccount of the danga of being killed haccidently. 'E is like you and me; 'e was born in too quiet a pa't of the country to be very dangerous. 'E likes to display all of 'is firearms and to pretend that 'e is a bad man, but everyone knows that 'e isn't and leaves 'im alone."

It was now becoming late, and, as Mr. Ensley was not used to horseback riding, he was tired. Besides, he had heard so much about the country that he was becoming restless, so asked that he be allowed to retire. Hamilton insisted that the inspector use their spare room, which he did. Mack unrolled his bed and slept in the open.

The next morning after a hearty breakfast, they prepared to depart. Mr. Ensley went into the kitchen to thank Mrs. Hamilton for the good meals and hospitality, but found she could not understand English. He therefore had to have Mr. Hamilton interpret his thanks to her. Unfamiliar with the customs of the country, he offered to pay for their lodging, but they would not

listen. So he gave each of the children a quarter. They then bid the family good-bye and started.

As soon as they were well out of sight of the house, the inspector stopped short in the trail and said: "I see no necessity for going any farther. Whatever indiscretions your rangers may or may not have committed are of minor importance, in view of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding—and the vastly larger issues involved. It is plainly a matter of whether the Government will control affairs in this section, or this old Mexican baron. The charges against your administration are mischievous, malicious, and false."

Apparently the conversations of the night before had made a deep impression on the inspector, and it was easy to see that he was afraid to go farther. This lack of heart disgusted Mack, and for a moment he was at a loss for a reply. Finally he said: "No doubt you have heard enough to be convinced yourself. But how about the Washington Office? What first hand evidence have you to present? Can you refute and overbalance the influence of Congressmen and other high officials, who believe the charges that Ortega has presented?"

"Well," replied the inspector, "I can't see how Ortega gets the backing that he has."

"That's easy," replied Mack. "They couldn't elect their candidates without the votes he controls. The result is that, whenever Ortega wants something, they feel duty bound to do all they can to help him. It's the machine. The patrons control their peons' votes. The votes control the machine."

The inspector mused: "The same old political machine, eh?"

Mack continued: "I want you to meet Ortega, and the rangers, too. Then when you go back to Washington you'll have something besides hearsay to tell. They wouldn't think much of your report if they learned that you had gone only halfway and turned back without seeing any of the men concerned in these complaints."

The inspector fairly gnawed at his cigar as he started

on again. Old Mack wiped a smile from the corners of his mouth, and took a fresh chew of tobacco.

All morning they passed down through the mountain park,—the inspector going ahead as Old Mack was leading the pack horse. This put them close enough together so they could converse occasionally when they felt so inclined.

Just about noon the trail led over a rocky ledge around a point. The pack started to turn and Old Mack stopped to readjust it. The inspector went on slowly, quite busily occupied in watching the narrow trail, looking down the precipitous incline on the lower side, protecting his knee from projecting boulders and hanging rocks, and clinging to the horn of his saddle with both hands.

Suddenly his horse stopped, and, looking up, he beheld another horseman. Before he had time to realize what was going on, he found himself looking into the muzzle of the six shooter of this stranger, who, quickly recovering, had pulled his forty-five, whirling it on his finger and cocking it at the same time.

After all that Hamilton had said the night before the very sight of a man had made Mr. Ensley's blood run cold. He had had visions of Cady several times during the night, as he would awaken suddenly. And to him this man seemed to coincide exactly with those visions. His long, drooping mustache extending far below his chin and his dark brown eyes expressing fear had been mistaken by the inspector to mean murder.

As a matter of fact, Dennis was almost as badly scared as the inspector. Only a couple of days before he had heard of the Mexicans shooting at Hardy. He was too frightened and dumfounded to speak and had no further line of action thought out. So there he sat, holding his gun on the inspector, who was standing in his stirrups reaching for the sky, not daring to breathe or blink an eye.

By this time Old Mack had the pack adjusted, and as he started down the trail he saw the situation in an instant. He fully realized the danger the inspector was

in from the six shooter held so menacingly in Dennis's trembling hand, but he could hardly keep from bursting with laughter at the ludicrousness of the situation. This time the smile spread all over him, culminating in convulsions of suppressed laughter. The first spasm over, he chuckled to himself: "If I surprise him, the darned fool will kill him."

Another spasm and still no change in the situation, so he reached in his pocket for his chewing tobacco. Dennis turned his glance just in time to see Old Mack cutting off a chew. As soon as he saw Old Mack his fear left him, and he immediately replaced his gun in its scabbard. The inspector timidly lowered his arms, fumblingly gripped the saddle horn again, and turned in time to see Old Mack painstakingly wiping off his knife blade.

Old Mack rode up. "I have an idea you gentlemen would get acquainted quicker if you knew each other's names. Inspector Ensley, allow me to introduce Forest Ranger Dennis."

Dennis was the first to speak: "Very glad indeed to make your acquaintance, Inspector Ensley," and, as he rode up close and extended his hand, added, not as an apology, but plainly as a boast of his efficiency, "I make a practice of getting the drop on every man I meet."

The inspector murmured: "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dennis." He could think of nothing more to say. He was completely wilted, but he was so relieved to find that this was not the real Tom Cady that he felt and acted quite friendly toward Dennis. However, Mack saw that he was in no condition to continue the journey, for the time at least, and, smothering another chuckle, he suggested that they all go down by the creek and eat lunch.

By the time they had finished and the inspector had heard the hairbreadth escapes that Dennis was eager to relate, it would have been impossible to tempt him further down the trail with a thousand dollar bill lest he might run upon the real Tom Cady. He knew he had been as

close to Old Mexico as he ever cared to be, and he longed to get out of that place and back to a civilized part of the United States as fast as his horse could take him.

Old Mack tried to impress on him the importance of his errand and the necessity for completing the investigation, but the inspector had had all of the investigation he wanted; and he told Old Mack, if he had men who were willing to work for the interest of the Government under such conditions, he would endorse anything they might do and would vindicate them from all charges. But, as far as he himself was concerned, he would not go a foot farther, and if Mack insisted on going ahead he could go by himself.

Mack saw that persuasion would be useless, so they turned around and started back. Nothing was said for some time. Then suddenly the inspector stopped short and, turning to Mack, said: "I realize that I am out of place out here in this wilderness. But I have influence at the other end of the line in Washington and will see that it is brought to bear. I can see that you are sincere, and that you and your rangers are doing a great work, whatever their faults and yours may be.

"As to politics, you don't need to tell me how the game is played. It merely surprises me to find that its web reaches away out here, and that this old Mexican is such an adroit and able spider.

"But even politics change. It is not only the President of the United States and the Chief Forester and sincere, conscientious men like yourself in the Service that believe in the principles of so-called Forestry. Men everywhere, in and out of the Service, are coming to believe in them. They are demanding that the public's property be protected. They want their share of the benefits derived from these resources. They cry against waste and for conservation. They want their sons to share in the use of the public lands yet remaining."

Painstakingly, perhaps meditatively, relighting his cigar, he continued: "Politicians as a rule are not deaf.

They hear the clamor of public opinion. It means votes. I am a politician, first, last and always." For the first time Mack saw a twinkle of merriment in his shrewd black eyes as he half jestingly added: "And you are a politician, Mr. Forest Supervisor,—old fox. You had me sized up right, and I've made no mistake in you."

Old Mack's smile was good-natured, but non-committal. He was a good listener.

"But," continued the inspector, "let me tell you something about politics. It is going to be good politics, from now on, to support the true principles of Forestry."

As he took fresh cigars from his case, proffering one to Mack and lighting one himself, he scanned Mack's countenance as though expecting some comment; but none was forthcoming except that good-natured, tolerant non-committal smile.

Perhaps the inspector read something in that smile which prompted an afterthought, for, as he picked up the bridle reins, he said: "But it wouldn't take many more trips like this to make me see what you men here in the West are up against."

Old Mack's smile broadened, but he made no reply. And, as the inspector had concluded his remarks, they rode on up the trail in silence.

CHAPTER XVII

PENITENTES AND VICTORY

That evening Mack and the inspector again approached the Hamilton ranch. The dogs barked their greeting as they had on the previous evening, and Hamilton came out, his countenance expressing wonder and interrogation. When he heard that they had decided not to go as far as Ortega's headquarters, he expressed his surprise and disappointment.

But the inspector was not inclined to explain, and showed that he was not in a conversational mood. To him, with his nerves shaken by the day's experiences and the long ride, Hamilton's ranch was a haven of rest. He could hardly dismount from his horse, and the few words that he did speak were sincere expressions of his appreciation of Hamilton's hospitality. Immediately after supper he sought the solace of the huge feather bed in the spare room.

Then Hamilton and Old Mack drew their chairs close to the fireplace and discussed the events of the past few days. There is something about a cheery old fireplace that invites confidence at any season, and at that altitude with its cool evenings it was also a necessity. Just that day one of Mrs. Hamilton's relatives had brought the latest tidings of the happenings on District Number Five which Hamilton lost no time in relating to Mack. By sifting the grain from the chaff, Mack learned much regarding what his rangers were doing and what was happening generally in that section.

The next morning the inspector felt more like himself, and, while he stowed away Spanish eggs, tortillas, and coffee sufficient for the long ride before him, he listened attentively to Hamilton's descriptions of the wonderful

country which he had failed to see by not continuing his journey into the realm of the Mayor Domo.

The inspector had spent his boyhood days in Connecticut, and, as Hamilton was also familiar with that State, he drew many of his comparisons of District Number Five from it. Hamilton showed that their areas were about the same, and in beauty of scenery and natural resources he politely and skillfully gave Connecticut a little the worst of it.

These comparisons surprised the inspector as he had not realized that Ortega's country had such potential possibilities, and in amazement he asked: "Do you mean to tell me candidly, Mr. Hamilton, that you believe this region over which Ortega has such complete dominion is capable with proper development of supporting a population equal to that of Connecticut?"

"Most assuredly I do! Most assuredly! Of course Connecticut 'as the hadvantage in regard to location, being on the seaboard and thus reaping benefits from channels of trade and manufacture of harticles, the raw materials for which are largely produced elsewhere. I dare say some of the 'ides from Ortega's cattle 'ave found their way into boots through some Connecticut shop. But what I 'ad reference to was sustaining the population that Ortega's country is capable of supporting. I tell you, when this country is developed, it will be one of the finest places in this whole Nation for an Hamerican to make 'is 'ome."

Once more in the saddle and with face turned toward civilization, the inspector was in a more natural frame of mind than had been the case at any time during the trip, and he began to evince some interest in his surroundings. After an hour's travel they came to a place where the trail forked, and, as they continued to the right, he inquired:

"Where does the trail to the left lead?"

"Oh! It goes over that high mountain you can see

there," Old Mack replied, pointing with his extended arm. "It's the one that looks so bald on top. Reaches almost to timberline."

"It must afford a wonderful view of the surrounding country."

"Yes, from the top one can see into three States, and into Old Mexico, if the weather is clear."

"How I would like to witness a scene of that kind!"

"We can go that way if you wish. It is a little rougher trail, but is really the more direct route." So saying Old Mack turned his horse across through the timber to the left fork of the trail.

The inspector was delighted and so expressed himself: "It will surely be a pleasure."

"We will reach the top about noon and lunch at the spring."

"Why, you don't mean to say that there is a spring of water on the top of that mountain?"


"Yes, that is what I mean to say, though it does seem strange. It's not a large spring, but it's excellently pure water—spurts right out of a large rock. There's a legend among the Penitentes regarding its origin. One of their number—a hermit saint—decided to make his home on top of that mountain. There was no water, so he prayed to God and smote the rock for water. And it came forth and has been flowing ever since."

"That is interesting. You say he was a Penitente saint? What do you mean by a Penitente?"

"Oh! The Penitentes are a religious order. They claim, I believe, to have been the original Catholic Church, or the Brotherhood of the Third Order of Franciscans. But now they are merely a bunch of fanatics."

"Are there many of them? I don't recall ever reading of them."

"Most of the Mexicans here belong to the order, I believe. It's hard to tell just who belongs and who does not; that is, unless you would go to the trouble to undress

them. It would be easy enough then, for they are all branded with three cross slashes  over the kidneys, and it's put on to stay,—cut through the flesh with a flint knife."

"Why, that's terrible! I wonder that many would submit to being marked in that manner."

"If that was all the torture they were required to submit to, they would be getting off easy. You see their belief is to inflict bodily injury or punishment as a penance for their sins. And once a year, during Lent, they whip themselves and each other sufficiently to atone for their sins during the past year. And some of them seem to have been great sinners, for instances have been known of their whipping themselves to death. They also crucify one or more of their number each year."

"Why! Is it possible that such barbaric practices are enacted, now!—here in the United States! Have you ever witnessed any of these performances?"

"No, I have not. It is not wise to exhibit too great curiosity. The nearest I have ever come to witnessing their performances was to ride up the trail on the other side of the mountain there the next day. The blood in the trail and on the crosses and in the morada on the top of the mountain was convincing enough proof to me that the punishment had been unstintingly applied."

"What is a morada?"

"That's their church or house of worship on top of the mountain. It is really nothing but a rude log hut, but every one of the logs in it was carried up the trail by Penitentes in their bare feet and stripped of all clothes except a piece of cloth tied about their loins. In fact, they bind bundles of cactus upon their bare backs and strew the trail with cactus each year, when they go up to worship. And, when they carried the logs up the mountain for their morada, they used bundles of cactus for pads on their shoulders.

"They whip themselves and one another with cat-o'-nine-tails made of weeds with pointed barbs that cut right

into their backs. The blood runs down to their heels. And the stony trail bruises and cuts their feet."

"Have you seen all of these things?" asked the inspector in a rather incredulous tone.

"No! But I have ridden up the trail the next day. It's no trouble at all to track them and get all the circumstantial evidence necessary to convince anyone.

"They make a terrible wailing sound, too, as they march up the trail, carrying a cross to give an actual representation of the crucifixion. It's a kind of chant, so weird that, if you once hear it, you never can forget it. To say that it is suggestive of ghosts is putting it mildly."

"And do they actually crucify some of their members?"

"Yes, you will see the crosses when we reach the top of the mountain. There are three of them,—a large one with a smaller cross on either side. They are within twenty feet, I should say, of the brink. You know there is a sheer drop of some four thousand feet on the other side of that mountain. Just a granite wall straight up and down—hangs over a little if anything—and it's at the very edge of this that they have erected their crosses, so the ones being crucified can look off over the precipice into space. It's not a pleasant feeling to even stand very close to the edge of that cliff, to say nothing of being hung on a cross there."

"I can easily believe it would make them repent of their sins, if that is their purpose. Do they actually nail the victims to the crosses?"

"No, they used to, but now they bind them with thongs all interwoven with cactus. I believe it is the intention to take them down before they die, but there have been instances when they waited too long."

"I should think the authorities would stop such practices. It is criminal."

"If the authorities, as you call them, are themselves Penitentes and take part in the proceedings, you would not expect much interference from them, would you?"

"But you don't mean to say that the better class are members of such a society of fanatics?"

"Many of them are—Ortega is one. It's one of the things which helps him to keep such complete control over his people.

"Then they have another practice. If one of their number becomes sick, he is attended by another member. They remain together until he becomes better or worse. In case he gets worse and dies, his attendant digs a hole in the ground deep enough to bury him standing. After he has the deceased nicely buried in this manner, he informs the relatives that he is dead and buried. Perhaps this is the very first they have heard that he was even sick. I do not know positively that this is done, but I have been told so by many, and I believe it is true. Of course the grave is not marked and no one is informed where it is."

"Does Ortega employ such methods to maintain his power?"

"Oh! I couldn't answer definitely as to that. I only know that he is a very prominent and influential Penitente. He may be perfectly sincere and saintly in that respect. But his influence among them makes him solid politically, whatever his motives or practices."

For a long time the inspector rode along in silence, pondering in his mind what Mack had told him about the Penitentes. He could hardly believe that it was true. But he did not have long to wait for further confirmation.

They were now nearing the top of the mountain, and the view of the surrounding forest commanded the inspector's whole attention. Once on top, they could not only overlook a large part of Old Mack's Forest, but also see out for a hundred miles beyond. The light atmosphere at that altitude lent telescopic range to their eyes. Before them lay the original map of a large portion of the Southwest, and Mack pointed out the objects of interest. They ate their lunch at the little spring, and then rode on to the morada, which, as Mack had said, was a small log cabin.

Inside at one end there was a rude altar and crucifixes with the Virgin Mary and other saints. The walls were whitewashed, but were besprinkled with blood. Hanging

from spikes driven into one of the side walls was a whole row of braided whips,—cat-o'-nine-tails—all covered with hard, dried human blood. This was sufficient to convince the inspector that Old Mack's story was no exaggeration.

From the morada a broad rocky trail led to the three crosses. On this trail could still be seen scattered bundles of dried cactus, and almost the full length of the trail was marked with blood stains. When they reached the crosses, which were about two hundred and fifty yards distant from the church, they found that these were also stained with blood, and bore unmistakable evidence of having been used for purposes of crucifixion.

Save for a few light colored clouds rolling up in the far west the sky was clear and blue. The midday sun, seemingly just overhead, made its presence felt with an emphasis—the light air offered little resistance to the penetration of its rays. The air was still; not a leaf rustled; not a tree, not a bird, not a living thing stirred—just perfect, sublime silence.

Below was an immense granite slide. To the inspector it seemed to be miles wide, miles long, miles high. To the right, to the left, and on every side was expanse of space. Standing there in the presence of those crosses of crucifixion, gazing out upon the mountains, plains, valleys, rivers, distant towns,—all becoming pygmean in that vastness,—the inspector experienced a feeling which he was powerless to express in words. Turning to Old Mack he said reverently: "Let's go."

Old Mack led the way, and they rode in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts. Mack's mind, however, was not turned to the admiration of the wonders of Nature, though he was observing more closely than the inspector. He was casting apprehensive glances at the white clouds rolling up in the west. They were now gathering together, seemingly in great haste, forming battalion after battalion, and growing dark as they massed their forces. There was still a deadly calm, and the heat was oppressive.

Sometime—perhaps when this old world was made,

perhaps throughout ages of evolutionary changes—but who knows when or how, that huge mountain of granite had become cracked, or fractured, as though Nature in placing it there had carelessly dropped it and had broken it in two. Then throughout other countless ages, heat, light, frost, and water, constituting with other elements the forces known as disintegration and erosion, had partially filled in this crack or fissure, so that it had been possible for the Penitentes to construct a trail up through it to the top of the mountain.

It was a steep, rocky, perilous trail. Great slabs of granite, loosened by frost or from other causes, had come crashing down into it and rolled along its path, breaking into pieces and finding lodging places, thus contributing to the process of filling it. At this season of the year, though, there was little danger from this source, and the rangers and mountaineers frequently rode up the trail in crossing the mountain.

Old Mack knew it was only a matter of minutes until Nature would make a most unpleasant display of her power. He had hoped to be down past the worst of the trail before the storm broke. But Nature had planned otherwise. They were destined to experience a thunder, lightning, and hail storm ten thousand feet above sea level.

Just as they arrived at the head of the trail the wind broke forth, then the lightning and thunder, rain and hail. It is useless to try to describe a thunder storm at that altitude. It has to be experienced. The flashes of lightning and the peals of thunder continue almost without intermission. It is one continuous roar, similar to a bombardment in modern warfare, with the flashes of lightning following one another in quick succession.

The horses turned tail and put their heads down between their legs, the electricity in the atmosphere playing over their hair. The men sitting in their saddles plainly felt the tingle of it. Both man and beast momentarily expected a bolt to end it all for them. Then the hail as frigid as a blast from the North Pole came as a climax

to batter home all the other sensations. A few of the stones were as large as hen eggs, and were driven with nearly enough force to knock down a man.

Here and there over that expanse of granite the hardy limber pines found root in the mossy soil of its crevices and grew sturdily,—umbrella shaped. But none of these were handy, so they humped their backs and sat in their saddles, relying on the quality of their hats for protection to their craniums.

When the hail ceased falling, all was over except the shivering. There was no way to build a fire, since there was no timber near and six inches of hail covered the ground. The horses began to show signs of a desire to move. During the early stages of the storm it would have been impossible to force them to move, but now they were eager to go.

The men suddenly became conscious that the sky was clear and blue. The sun was shining hotly again, and the air was perfectly calm. Where had the clouds disappeared to so suddenly? They could still hear the roar of the distant thunder. Facing down the trail, they could see out over the storm below them, looking black and flat on top, and they witnessed the rending of the clouds by the flashes of electricity. Soon the clouds cleared away into a mist. The vapor had condensed and fallen.

About three hours were consumed in making the descent of some four thousand feet. The storm had made the trail more perilous than usual. There were places so steep and slippery that the horses crouched low and slid. The water from the rain and melting hail, laden with debris, was rushing in from the sides and claimed the trail as its right of way for short distances until a lower level turned its course to the side again. This water accompanied them all the way down,—sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, and at times in the middle of the trail,—ever increasing in volume and velocity, threatening to become a dangerous traveling companion. The sound of the foaming, splashing waters sent up a roar which forbade any conversation. It is

doubtful, however, if there was any inclination to converse.

When hastily preparing for the storm, the inspector had neglected to adjust his slicker over the pommel and cantle of his saddle, with the result that the rain had run down into the seat of his saddle, and the hail had slid down into it, forming an ice pack about him. His hat, having been designed more with a view to appearance than for purposes of general utility, had been battered shapeless and was soaked through; the water, trickling down both sides of his face and the back of his neck, inside of his collar, saturating his underclothing and filtering through, had joined with that in the saddle seat in its downward course through his pants legs into his puttees and shoes. The sensations produced by this condition were not conducive to conversation—certainly not concerning the scenic wonders about them.

Finally they came to the last place where the waters claimed the trail. Beyond this they could see out across the comparatively open country,—the lower ranges. There they would find fuel in plenty and grassy plots where the horses could graze. The stream was quite wide, but not so swift as at some of the other crossings, and they were soon on the other side.

Selecting a camping place, Old Mack unslung the bed from the pack horse and spread it out on the ground, politely commanding the inspector to strip to the skin and crawl in between the woolen blankets. No second invitation was necessary, and soon Old Mack had the wet clothing hung out to dry beside a cheery camp fire, and was cooking supper. Mack did not need to stop and dry his clothes, as his "Big Four Stetson" hat, properly adjusted slicker, chaps, and cowboy boots had kept him dry and comfortable.

About noon of the following day they arrived at Mack's office and, after removing the most apparent evidences of the trip and eating a good dinner, were ready to go over the fresh complaints and petitions that Ortega had wired

in. There were also urgent demands and requests from certain Senators and Congressmen. Explanations were being demanded on all sides. Some action must be taken at once.

The inspector was now in the proper frame of mind to look over the data which Mack had at hand bearing on Ortega and his petitions, and also the maps and reports that had been sent in by Berger. His trip made him feel quite familiar with the situation, and he was surprised at the completeness of Mack's case. Every point was substantiated by affidavits or irrefutable evidence. This he now appreciated, as no one realized better than he the opposition that he would encounter when he submitted his report vindicating Mack's administration and the conduct of his men in the field.

After going over the material again carefully with Mack for an hour or more, he asked for the assistance of one of the stenographers, and spent the balance of the afternoon in making out his report to the central office.

That evening at the depot he shook Old Mack's hand and noted again that good-natured smile. Was there a suspicion of triumph in that smile? Was it just good nature? Or did it denote self-reliant, bulldog tenacity? Many had unconsciously tried to analyze that smile. Most people liked it, even his enemies. For, whatever else it might portray on occasion, it always expressed sincerity; it was not deceptive. Old Mack was always behind it.

And as the inspector settled down in the cushions once more in his natural garb and environment he thought over the whole matter and unconsciously felt more self-respecting for having met Mack and for deciding to support him in his undertakings. Mack's association and the trip had done him good.

The next morning a pile of important letters lay awaiting Mack's attention. Most of these letters referred to business that his deputy had not felt competent to

handle. Absorbed in them, Mack completely dismissed Ortega from his mind.

He was not to get much rest, however, for that very afternoon who should come into the office but Ortega himself. Ortega had learned that the inspector was there and had come to see him; but, finding that he had already left on the night train the evening before, he thought he might take advantage of the opportunity to intimidate Mack.

Mack recognized him as soon as he stepped into the office, and invited him to come in and be seated. This Ortega did, and after exchanging a few words he proceeded to tell of the latest outrages which the rangers had been committing. He also stated, with great emphasis, that the common people were becoming so incensed against the rangers that he feared they would soon resort to acts of violence. In fact, he had heard it rumored already that some one had made an attempt to kill one of them. While he had pleaded with his people against committing rash acts of violence, he felt that he could no longer protect the rangers by his influence, nor in fact did they deserve such protection.

Mack sat back, the little smile on his face plainly expressing amusement. He looked Ortega squarely in the eye while he listened attentively to all that was said. As Ortega's complaints continued, his grin broadened.

"Have my rangers appealed to you for protection, Mr. Ortega?" There was sarcasm as well as mirth in this utterance, and the grin could not be misinterpreted. Old Mack was enjoying the interview.

Bursting into a rage, Ortega fairly thundered: "Applied to me for protection! They accuse me, blame me for all the trouble they are bringing upon themselves by their notorious conduct! They even come into my office and endanger my life,—warning me they will hold me responsible for whatever happens—the braggarts! Haven't you read the complaints and petitions of my people? Are you blind and deaf, that you don't understand the gravity of the situation? I myself shall make

a trip to Washington and not only get your desperado rangers, but you also removed from your petty offices."

Out of breath and exasperated by that broad grin, Old Ortega paused and, jumping to his feet, was about to leave; but Mack was speaking.

"I am not going to threaten you with what I am going to do," said Mack. "But before you start on your trip to Washington I think you should know what I am doing. In the main office here I have my deputy and chief clerk now at work making out the papers in connection with filing a trespass suit against you for the cattle and sheep which you are unlawfully grazing upon the Forest. And I also have papers in the course of preparation to prosecute you on several different criminal charges. I will state for your information that I have ample proof now in my possession to substantiate these criminal charges.

"As to the men in the field, I am making no changes at present. Furthermore, I am going to take the liberty to give you a little personal advice: If you don't want to find yourself in the Federal penitentiary, the best thing for you to do is stop this foolishness and start living like a civilized man."

They then looked each other in the eye for some seconds. Old Mack's grin broadened still farther, and Ortega was enough of a mind reader to see that Mack was not only very much in earnest, but thoroughly enjoying the situation.

Ortega still believed, however, that his political power would take care of him and said: "You can't prosecute me. You know that. All the pains you are going to will simply result in your losing your little job. When the Senators in Washington get through with you, you will be a common tie hacker as you were not long ago."

Mack reached for a copy of the report which the inspector had sent in to the Washington Office the night before, and, turning to Ortega, said: "What you say about my losing my job may all be true. But do you realize that you are dealing with the United States Government?"

Suppose you succeed in getting me and all of my rangers fired. Do you suppose after this report has reached the Washington Office, and I get this trespass suit and this criminal suit filed against you, that Uncle Sam is going to drop it? If you'll excuse my frankness, I will say that I am surprised that a man of your intelligence should show such stupidity."

"Oh, you want me to buy you off, do you?" Then, dropping his head in all seriousness, Ortega paused for a minute and, again looking at Mack and seeing that he was still grinning, he suddenly picked up his hat and hurriedly left the office, muttering to himself: "I'll get you yet."

A couple of days later in came Ortega again. During the meantime he had been to see his attorneys.

He lost no time in stating that he would like to talk confidentially, so Mack took him into his inner office and closed the door. This time Ortega's manner had changed. Instead of trying again to intimidate, he immediately began in a most affable manner to ask for terms of settlement, intimating that he would be willing to pay whatever sum was necessary to have these cases which Mack had started against him dropped, as he realized that what Mack had said about its being the United States Government with which he was to deal was true.

"Mr. Ortega, the only way in which you can make settlement is for you to pay the Government in full for all trespasses which you have committed, and henceforth comply with all the regulations governing the National Forests. Your money will not influence me. And, if I thought I had a ranger whom you could either intimidate or buy, I would fire him immediately. As to the criminal cases, it is within my power to drop them for the time being. It will depend entirely upon your own conduct as to whether or not they will be dropped permanently. As far as owing me anything, you owe me nothing. But, as to Uncle Sam, he is the one you owe and the one with whom you must settle."

When Ortega saw that it was going to be impossible

to bribe Mack, he realized that there was only one way out of it. But he decided to make one more bargain if he could.

"I have come to realize that Uncle Sam is too big an opponent for me to buck. I will pay the trespasses in full, and I will comply with every regulation and influence my people to do likewise. But I have one request to make."

"What is it, Mr. Ortega?"

"It is that you send rangers to my part of the country who are gentlemen, and who will act like gentlemen and treat me like a gentleman. I believe my request is reasonable, and I beg of you to consider it."

By this time Mack saw that Ortega had given in completely, and, fully realizing that the rangers had not treated him with any too great respect, especially since they had learned of the charges against them, he answered:

"I have been intending to take these men out of that part of the Forest as soon as they have accomplished the work I had laid out for them. And, if you live up to the promises which you have just made, their work will be accomplished in your part of the country. I will then replace them with men who will use entirely different tactics, and treat you and all others as gentlemen."

As Ortega stepped out a clerk came in, and laid before Mack the last telegram from sources on high. Ortega had been keeping the wires hot to drive as good a bargain as he could. Old Mack sat back, thumbs tucked in the armholes of his vest, and thought. Things were still in a bad mess. Even after victory the reconstruction period would be "rough riding".

CHAPTER XVIII

THE REIGN OF TERROR

The formality and red tape in connection with the settlement of Ortega's various trespasses consumed some little time. Old Mack had also to take up the matter of the transfer of the rangers. He wanted to get a better position for Hardy as a reward for his faithful services. Berger must not be demoted. He desired to keep Brewster, but would confine him to his own district and not allow him to tantalize Ortega. This also offered a good opportunity to get rid of Dennis in the general shuffle.

He asked his superiors to recommend such men as they thought would be suitable to fill the vacancies, but he did not wish to notify Hardy and Berger of the changes he was about to make until all these matters had been arranged. He was anxious to have the changes made as soon as possible, as he understood men well enough to know that the charges which the rangers now knew had been made against them, and the attempts which Ortega had made to assassinate them, would not be conducive to good deportment on their part.

None of the rangers, excepting Dennis, knew anything of the inspector's visit. All were likewise ignorant of the understanding that Old Mack had reached with Ortega. As the rangers had become acquainted and had a common enemy in Old Ortega, they kept in close touch with each other, scarcely a week passing but that Brewster or Blair visited Hardy and Berger or received their return call. The natives of Ranger District Number Five saw the rangers more than ever before and were more impressed, for everywhere they went they made their presence known by their important, arrogant, and officious manners.

They knew not whom to count as friends, and they

made it plain to all that they could do very well without any. It became a favorite pastime for them to shoot all dogs that crossed their path, and this sometimes kept them fairly busy while passing through the little Mexican settlements, as the Mexican has even more dogs than children. Many of the people inherit the Indian superstition against killing a dog, fearing it might be the possessor of their ancestor's spirit.

But, strange to say, they do not care if someone else commits the act—and often welcome the riddance—unless the dog happens to be valuable for herding goats or sheep. So this pastime of the rangers was not as vexatious to the natives as the rangers may have intended it to be, but rather served the purpose of new expositions of good marksmanship. The Mexicans really marveled at the skill in handling a six shooter that was constantly displayed by the rangers. They seldom ever missed a dog.

The conduct of the rangers was correctly interpreted as open defiance. It was plain enough that they were looking for trouble. Each had a "chip on his shoulder". They were anxious for Old Ortega to return, as he was the one before whom they wished to flaunt their challenge.

Dennis came over once and told them of his meeting Old Mack and the inspector and of their turning back. It incensed the rangers more than ever to think that the inspector did not have nerve enough to ride over into that country once—and with Old Mack along as a bodyguard, at that. Then, too, they felt the injustice of not having had the opportunity to tell their side of the story to the inspector.

Hardy had been acting as a kind of balance wheel, trying to hold the boys in check. He thought they were carrying the matter too far, but he could not help but enjoy the humiliation which they were dealing out to Ortega's gang. Moreover, when Ortega came back, he himself was inclined to show his authority and defiance more or less plainly as the occasion and his personal feelings dictated.

Quite a few white men were now moving into the country looking for locations, and he saw to it that the fence to the big pasture was kept open. He let all of these settlers know that the land inside was open to application for listing as homesteads. One of the things which greatly surprised him, however, was to see Ortega put a crew of men to work taking down the big fence.

Some of the homesteaders brought their families. With these people the rangers became quite friendly. Especially was this true of Berger, who had fallen "head over heels" in love at first sight with one of the most beautiful maidens he had ever seen, this beauty, by name Virginia Ashton, being the daughter of one of the settlers.

Each Sunday he spent a number of hours making his toilet immaculate and fastidiously adjusting his clothing and paraphernalia. He kept one horse purposely for the occasion, and spent hours grooming him and braiding and curling his mane, foretop, and tail. Brewster in all his glory could not outshine Berger now. In fact, Berger's personal appearance was now at all times far above par. It would be unjust to Hardy not to mention that he also had by gradual stages worked back from a primitive state to the point where he presented quite a civilized appearance. The cause of the transformation was not quite so obvious as in Berger's case, but the change was, nevertheless, very noticeable, and no doubt was due to the change of environment.

The time was drawing near for the celebration of Independence Day. That would mean another big festival,—more pretentious, in fact, than the Election had been. Berger and Brewster had met and discussed this event, and had decided to attend and, in order to live up to their reputation, outdo the performance that they had enacted at Cady's baile. They thought it would be necessary to have Blair; and this time they decided to invite Dennis, too. So Berger rode over to Blair's to notify him of the event, and they sent word to Dennis.

Blair and Berger had further developed their plans.

Blair had a race horse that he wished to match against Cyclone, and Dennis also had a horse that he boasted of a great deal. So it was arranged that they would all meet at Hardy's and Berger's camp the night before the celebration, and discuss their plans and make arrangements for the big day. One thing was certain,—they were going to take complete charge of events and run this celebration according to their own ideas, even though it was supposed to be in memory of the Independence of Old Mexico.

They knew that the recent arrivals of white men in the vicinity would add strength to their side by the influence of their presence, if in no other way, though they did not feel the need of any backing. They felt sufficient unto themselves to show those Mexicans, and especially Ortega, a high class example of Gringo rule.

In accordance with their program, on the eve of the big day the rangers assembled about the camp fire and discussed the merits of their race horses and the matching of the races. The races really had been introduced by Berger and Brewster as a clever scheme to entice Hardy to participate in the celebration. Needless to say, it was successful. It was a secret between old Cyclone and Hardy that they had been practicing at times when Berger was away, and this time old Cyclone's interest was also aroused.

The next morning saw the population of the whole country side on the move,—the same as at the time of the Election the previous fall, except that this time there were in addition to the rangers a dozen or more white men, counting grown boys, and in a half dozen of the families were included some of the fair sex. The events of the day were to be as usual,—races, chicken pull, barbecue, baile; though this time the chicken pull was to be the introductory event of the day, and the races and other sports were to take place in the afternoon.

At the rangers' camp no one overslept that morning. Great care was taken by all in making their toilets. In addition to his usual grand display, Brewster had two

cartridge belts encircling his waist, and on the opposite hip from his pearl handled six shooter hung a substantial forty-five. His horse, as well as Berger's was decorated with fancy ribbons and wreaths of flowers.

Hardy rode the silver mounted saddle on Knight. The horse had been rested up for the occasion, and was now fat and sleek again, and that morning acted the part of a real bronc, or wild horse, when Hardy rounded him up to saddle.

Dennis, of course, had his usual display of artillery, including a rifle on either side of his horse and six guns hanging low in their belt on either hip. He may also have had a Mexican dagger in his boot leg. His appearance was altogether fitting for the occasion. But his armament did not attract the close scrutiny of the other rangers this time, as Dennis had learned at the roundup to use discretion in displaying his accomplishments in the handling of the same when in the company of his peers.

Blair was just the same old Blair, as on all occasions. True, he had brought his cat and typewriter, but the rangers had grown accustomed to these and thought little of them now. Suffice it to say his appearance was very satisfactory to all, including Brewster, who was very discriminating. And the race horse that he had brought showed points in muscle development which excited the admiration of all, and caused Hardy to have some apprehension as to the outcome of the race, for the stakes between him and Blair were to be a month's salary check.

They secured an early start and arrived at the scene of the festivities just as the chicken pull was well under way. Brewster, as usual, was for immediate action, and lost no time in becoming a participant in the race for the chickens. Berger, Blair, and Dennis were not far behind. They bore down on the performance at full speed and raced in among the Mexican ponies and riders, and, as their horses were heavier and much faster than those of the Mexicans, they of course ran over them, clearing the track and knocking them out of the way.

When they came to the end of their ride, each one

except Dennis was in possession of a chicken, and they immediately began riding about among such horsemen as were unfortunate enough to be around, beating them over the head with the chickens according to the rules of the game—except that this time they were the pursuers instead of the pursued, as the possessors of the chickens should have been according to the rules.

This performance also knocked many of the Mexican ponies off their feet and caused their riders to dismount in a most promiscuous manner. As long as there were still some shreds of the chickens left, the field looked like a battle field after an engagement with disabled men lying all about.

The bystanders were scattering and fleeing in all directions as fast as the means of locomotion which God had given them would permit. Many in trying to run too hastily stumbled in their headlong flight, and others had fallen over them, causing them to pile up like rows of unfortunate victims after a charge into the enemy's lives.

Even Dennis had finally managed to seize a chicken from the sand, and at the end of the fray he was perhaps the wildest rider in the bunch. At any rate, he was the most ferocious and conspicuous. He was already serving the purpose for which the boys had brought him. Even at this time it was evident to all, and most painfully so to some, that the rangers were in charge of the day.

Hardy had been looking after the pack horses and race horses while the others had been participating in the sports thus described. He did not approve of such extremes, but he could not help but enjoy secretly the humiliation which all of this must have caused to Tom Cady and Ortega, who had driven out with a fancy new team and carriage to witness the event.

Just at this time a crowd of white people appeared on the scene. In fact, they had not been at such a great distance but that they were very interested observers of the whole affair. They came directly up to the rangers, showing a disposition to be sociable and become better

acquainted. Introductions were made all around, though Berger and Hardy had met most of them before.

These people were all wearing their best clothes, and, while each of the men carried a six shooter on his hip, their appearance was that of a civilized folk, and in meeting them the rangers felt rather embarrassed under the weight of their armament; and the conspicuousness of their extremely wild and woolly Western paraphernalia seemed to strike Berger with special force as he introduced Brewster, Blair, and Dennis to the ladies, including the idol of his heart and her mother. He actually stuttered and stammered.

But the consciousness of their ungodly appearance was not by any means the only reason for Berger's flushed face and extreme embarrassment. Beside the beautiful damsel stood a young man dressed in the latest style, a most recent arrival in the community. In fact, he had arrived just the night before, and Berger did not have to be told that his relationship to the young lady was not one of blood, but of love. A rival to his affections had not occurred to his mind before, and the shock was almost too much for his nerves.

He was ashamed of his appearance and of his conduct which Virginia and her people had doubtless witnessed. He thought of how he had dressed in his college days, and through his mind flashed the thought that, if he were wearing that kind of clothes, he could appear just as well before her as did his rival. He was certainly far superior to him physically. It was plain that this other fellow was a house plant. Probably this was his first trip into the wilds, and that scorching sun had left its mark on his countenance.

If Berger had been in possession of his own wits, he would have noticed that the discomfiture of the other young man was equal to his own. Such Wild West performances were a new experience to him, and he felt strangely out of place there among those Mexicans and strange scenes, even though he was with sweetheart and friends.

Of course the rangers received a very cordial invitation to have dinner with the white people, picnic fashion, as they had brought an abundance of everything, and had, in fact, planned to invite Berger and Hardy. This invitation was accepted, and the self-consciousness of the rangers increased until they felt like a bunch of bashful Sunday School kids being introduced to some little girls at a church sociable by the pastor's wife. But there was no way out of it. As their wits gradually returned, each decided to adapt himself to the unexpected circumstances and make the best of it.

Before the dinner was over, they began to feel somewhat at ease visiting with these people, and the good old-fashioned home cooking completely restored them, barring something which seemed to be the matter with Berger's heart. It seemed to be palpitating so hard at times that he wondered if the others could hear it beating.

The object of his admiration was, however, not the only fair lady, heart free, in the crowd,—as there was another girl who commanded the sly glances and admiration of all the other rangers, especially Blair and Brewster. Even at this stage of the game Cupid was busily planning other rivalry in the camp. He was shooting his darts all around, and he noticed that not only Virginia, but the one who had already attracted the attentions of Brewster and Blair, were looking upon Brewster with ill-concealed admiration in their eyes.

Blair's wit and droll style of narration caused much merriment for all; and it was noticeable that this was not the first time that Dennis had dined in refined society.

After dinner the sports of the afternoon began, and the rangers took charge of the races and assisted the white people in securing points of vantage. Hardy, with Berger to interpret for him, searched out and introduced to them the most influential Mexicans who would have charge of the events, and told them about the races that they were going to match among themselves. The rangers assured the Mexicans that they wished them to continue with the program they had planned, and told them they

would not interfere in any way except by way of keeping order and in helping to make the affair successful, as they wished to have their new friends witness the entertainment which the true Mexican sports would afford.

After the Mexican events had been completed in fine style to the enjoyment of all, came the horse race between Blair and Hardy, which was to be the big event of the day, so far as the rangers were concerned.

It had been agreed upon by both Hardy and Blair the evening before that Berger should be judge of the race. Brewster acted as marshal of the day to keep the crowd back and aided in obtaining a clear view for his friends. He had his hands full too, for, when it became evident that the rangers were going to put on a race, the Mexican populace all began to crowd in near the finishing line where they would be able to see the whole performance.

Hardy and Blair began getting their race horses ready. When they reached the starting point, it took two men, Dennis and one of the new settlers, to hold old Cyclone down to the earth. Cyclone knew what was coming this time, and it was harder than ever to hold him under control.

As Blair's horse was trained and used to racing, it was difficult to get them both started at once. So they agreed that they would hold old Cyclone at the starting point and allow Blair to come past. To one of the newcomers was delegated the honor of firing the gun at the instant that Blair's horse came even with old Cyclone.

The race was a repetition of the one the previous fall. At the sound of the gun old Cyclone shot into the air and down the track at lightning speed, but again lost his wind, and Blair's horse came up and passed him about the end of the third quarter. Again Hardy relied upon the old tactics and waited until the psychological moment at which to inspire old Cyclone with new energy by a shot from his forty-five held close to the horse's ears.

Hardy had hoped not to have to use this extreme method, as it was very painful to Cyclone, on account of the fact that he had been gunshocked at some time in his

early life. But in order to win the race necessity demanded it. Instead of holding the gun over and back of Cyclone's head, however, Hardy discharged it at the very side of Cyclone's ear.

Again Cyclone shot into the air; but this time, instead of continuing toward the goal, it was Hardy who shot ahead and Cyclone, swerving sharply, went diagonally for the crowd.

Berger saw instantly that Cyclone was headed straight for Virginia and her family. Something must be done! The shouting ceased! All held their breath in the horror of expectancy! Those people could not get out of the way, crowded together as they were. Inevitably someone would be killed!

At the speed at which Cyclone was traveling it gave only an instant's time in which to take action. And Berger took it. It is not recorded that anyone's eye was quick enough to catch the movement of Berger's hand as he drew his six shooter from its holster and shot, but simultaneously with the report old Cyclone came to the earth for his last time, shot through the head.

The speed at which Cyclone was moving caused him to roll over and slide some distance before he finally stopped at the very feet of the screaming Virginia and her frightened escort and others who were falling all over each other in their attempts to get out of the way.

Hardy, too, had completed his aerial flight, but had not succeeded in outdistancing Blair. While he rolled for several yards after hitting the earth, he finally came to a stop some distance short of the mile post; and, had there been any Red Cross ambulances in that vicinity, their immediate presence would have been required.

In their absence Brewster, who had been on the opposite side of the track holding back the crowd, rushed to Hardy's assistance, and was on the ground beside him almost as soon as he stopped rolling. Berger also hurried up, and they administered first aid. Hardy was not at all unconscious this time. Instead he was decidedly the reverse. Some of his first remarks he later regretted



"At the speed at which Cyclone was traveling it gave only an instant's time in which to take action."

greatly when he realized that they were overheard by the white women. But at the time the pain which he was suffering took all of his attention. Berger and Brewster carried him back into the crowd which by this time had recovered from its fright, and just then the young city visitor remembered that he was a medical student and stepped forward to offer his assistance. He soon discovered that Hardy had a broken collar bone, and they took him to the rangers' camp, where they bandaged it up as best they could and put Hardy to bed.

In the excitement that followed the accident everything except Hardy's comfort was forgotten; and Dennis and Brewster never once thought of their race, which was to have followed that of Blair's and Hardy's.

But by the time supper was over, Hardy was beginning to feel as comfortable as he could under the circumstances, and, seeing that the boys were making ready to spend the evening with him, called them over to his bed and told them that they should not allow him to interfere with their going to the dance.

However, they were not willing to leave him alone, and started a discussion which involved not only the rangers, but the whole party; and was not settled until Virginia's mother and father insisted on staying with Hardy to care for him. They said they were too old to dance and would only sit and watch anyway, and they would not be missing much by staying in camp. So it was decided that the rangers and the girls should go to the dance.

Virginia's mother had some anxiety about allowing her daughter to attend a dance in that kind of a crowd unchaperoned. But the rangers all assured her that she need not fear any harm because the baile would be conducted in a decorous and orderly manner. She could see that they were men who were masters of whatever situation they might encounter, so she let Virginia go.

The dance was held in the wool warehouse, as the wool had again been marketed. Tom Cady was not present this time to keep order; in fact, nothing had been seen

of either him or Ortega since the first performance of the day,—the chicken pull,—which had been forgotten by nearly everyone except a few who had received injuries. So Brewster took charge of affairs, and with the assistance of the other rangers cleared the hall of all “drunks” and any others who became objectionable to them. As had been prearranged by the rangers, each contributed a dollar toward a fund with which to enlist the best efforts of the musicians. The result was that in a surprisingly few moments complete order was secured and the dance in full swing.

Of course the rangers had to dance with all of the white women first. This caused the señoritas to feel slighted and jealous, and perhaps to realize more fully than before that there was a warm spot in their hearts for the hated Gringos after all. But, as the dance progressed, they occasionally had an opportunity to dance with the rangers, and especially with Blair and Dennis, who were very popular among them.

Berger's second dance had to be with the one who had occupied his thoughts and as much of his attention all day as propriety and the circumstances would permit. However, he was again embarrassed by the rapturous manner in which Virginia thanked him for acting so promptly in saving her life,—a feat which had made her feel that Berger was little short of superhuman. She conveyed this impression to Berger more completely than she had intended or realized, asking him how he could think what to do and act so quickly, and how it had been possible for him to shoot in that crowd without hitting anything but the horse.

To this Berger replied that he had been waiting opposite the mile post, where he could witness the outcome of the race. Fortunately the crowd had not gathered in line with the shot, as he shot lengthwise of the track. He did not like to discuss the subject, as he did not consider the feat anything extraordinary and did not enjoy being a hero.

But the conversation broke the ice, and he soon forgot

all about his Wild West costume and was confiding little secrets of a very personal nature in return for the sincere compliments that she so unconsciously paid him. The result was that before the evening was over Cupid shot an arrow poisoned with jealousy through her escort's heart, which tied his tongue and made him rather uncompanionable, all against his will and any effort that he could make to the contrary.

Blair and Dennis and Brewster were vying with each other for favors with the other white women, and especially the unattached young lady, who was attractive enough to have received attention in any ballroom, and they were enjoying themselves immensely, partly because of the very apparent jealousy of the señoritas.

Virginia noticed that the young medical student was jealous of Berger and naturally resented it, for she felt that she owed Berger some attention for having saved her life, and felt that her lover should not resent it.

Before the evening was over she had confided to Berger how well he looked in his Western makeup, and he had confided to her something of his feelings in admiration for her. And, to cut a long story short, they became so absorbed in each other that they almost forgot the Eastern visitor, who had become more or less of a wallflower, as it was beneath his dignity to dance with the señoritas.

This was not the case, however, with some of the other white men, who during the evening had become quite proficient in dancing the Mexican dances with the beautiful young señoritas and were captivated by their charms, at least sufficiently so that their better halves were casting apprehensive glances in their direction quite often, as they saw them whirl by completely oblivious to everything except the dazzling black eyes of their partners.

When the dance broke up, there was the best feeling between the Mexicans and the rangers that had ever existed. The Mexicans had enjoyed the afternoon and evening more than any celebration that they had previously attended and swore by the rangers as being excellent managers. Berger and Virginia had become so absorbed

in each other that he took her arm and started for Virginia's camp, completely ignoring the presence of the young medical student, who followed with the rest of the crowd.

But the surprise of the evening to Brewster and Blair came when Brewster asked for the privilege of taking the other girl home, and they found that she had already accepted Dennis's invitation. They had each been thinking all evening of asking for this privilege; and then to find that Dennis—the married rascal—had beat their time was the limit!

Before breaking camp the next morning Berger and Brewster went to the post-office, as the mail had come in the night before. There they found three letters from the Supervisor's office,—one addressed to Berger, one to Brewster, and one to Hardy.

Opening their letters immediately, Brewster found that his contained instructions from Old Mack to remain on his own district from that time; and Berger found he was to be transferred to another Forest. Old Mack thanked them both for the services they had rendered in straightening out affairs on Ranger District Number Five. And so tactfully did he inform them that their usefulness there was now at an end that the men did not resent it, but rather rejoiced that they had completed their work to Old Mack's satisfaction,—the work that had not been altogether pleasant, though they had made the best of it and had derived much pleasure from it.

They were curious to know what Hardy's letter contained, but they restrained their curiosity and took it directly to him. When Hardy opened it, he found that he was to report to Mack's office, as a position awaited him which, it was hoped, would in a measure reward him for the faithful services which he had rendered.

Just at that time it was impossible for either Berger or Hardy to leave, as Hardy was unable to travel and Berger was unwilling to leave him in that condition. Berger wrote a letter, therefore, to the Supervisor, telling him

of Hardy's accident, and stating that his orders would be complied with as soon as circumstances would permit.

How Berger would have welcomed the transfer the fall before!

But now, for some reason or other, which perhaps would not be hard to guess, he was not at all enthusiastic. No doubt, he reasoned, Old Mack thought he was doing him a favor; for to be placed in charge of a ranger district—presumably a much better location—would certainly be in the nature of a promotion.

Berger did not have much time to think the matter over, as in the presence of Blair and Brewster something was always happening. They were action personified. This morning the three of them hurried about and buried Old Cyclone and prepared to move camp. They had expected Dennis to help, but, much to their chagrin, they found that he had stolen the march on them again and had gone off with the white people. Even Brewster, who had always been the complete master of every situation, seemed powerless. Dennis was certainly no understudy this time.

As Hardy was unable to travel in any way except on a bed, the people who had cared for him the night before insisted on his being put into their wagon and taken to their home, where he would receive the best attention and care that they and the medical student could give him.

Finally along toward noon, after helping fix Hardy comfortably in the wagon and burying Cyclone, the boys decided it was about time to move camp. So, taking the letters which they had written to the post-office, they started for Berger's camp in the little mountain valley.

Being mid-afternoon before they reached there, Brewster and Blair were easily persuaded to remain over night with Berger, and all spent the rest of the afternoon and evening talking over the events of the day before. Then, too, they realized they would see little of each other from then on, and they hated to part.

The next morning, however, Brewster concluded he

had been away from his district as long as was best and started for home. He did not bid Berger good-bye, as Berger said he would come through that way when he left the country. Blair, too, expected to see Berger again before he left,—the fact of the matter being that no one wished to say "Good-bye".

Berger did not altogether enjoy living alone, and during the next few weeks he did little each day except to care for the horses and visit with Hardy. Incidentally he made good use of the opportunity of visiting with the girl of his choice,—Virginia.

So time slipped by. Dennis remained only a day or two at the other settler's place, as Hardy had inadvertently let the cat out of the bag by saying that Dennis was a married man. This of course had immediately been told to the girl whom he had captured, with the result that he had left for his district and had not been heard from since.

CHAPTER XIX

BABES IN THE WOODS

While all of these things were taking place, Old Mack was not idle. When he received the reply to his letter asking for some changes among the rangers, he sat back in his chair with a smile on his face,—a smile which widened this time not into a grin, but into a laugh. As he had expected, they had approved of the changes he wished to make, and he said, half aloud: "That will satisfy the wishes of those politicians who were bringing such pressure to bear on us. Perhaps we won't lose our jobs after all. They'll think they have accomplished *their* purpose and you know *I* have."

Mack had asked his superiors to recommend suitable men to fill the places that would be vacated by Berger and Hardy and Dennis. This they had been glad to do; and two men appeared on the scene shortly after Mack received the letter. These men he sent out, with instructions to meet Hardy and Berger.

They found their way as far as Hamilton's place without difficulty, and there listened eagerly to all of his tales. Dennis had been over to see Hamilton, and had described the manner in which the rangers broke up the chicken pull. This was the part of the celebration that had remained most vividly in his memory, and it was hardly possible to exaggerate it much. Through the tales which his wife's relatives had related, Hamilton had also learned how Hardy was laid out and his horse killed. Putting the two tales together, he decided that the rangers' luck had turned, and he was now daily expecting to hear of misfortune having befallen the other rangers. In fact, he believed that Mack was trying to get them out of the country to save their lives.

He could see that his stories were making an impression upon the young men, and he rather enjoyed the situation. In sizing up the new men, he decided that they were not

fitted for the rough life that they would have to live in that country. He had come to believe that the old rangers were well fitted, if any men could be. Besides, he did not desire to see any others take their places at that time.

He need not have worried about the matter, however; for the next morning, instead of continuing, the prospective rangers turned back on the trail. They had had enough of that kind of ranger life. The picture that Hamilton had drawn did not coincide with the one they had in mind.

So when they came back to the Supervisor's office, Old Mack was not greatly surprised. He looked over the list of applicants and sent the next pair out by a different route, so that they would not pass by Hamilton's place. At the same time he notified his superiors of the resignations of the first two and of the action he had taken, and asked for further instructions.

A day or two later these new rangers might have been seen coming down a narrow trail through the thick spruce timber.

One was a heavy set lad, perhaps twenty-two years old; the other tall and slender, about the same age. One was from New York, with a partial course in the Forestry School at Yale to his credit. The other man was from Maryland, qualified as a civil engineer, and a graduate of the one-year course in Forestry at Biltmore. Each was highly recommended by his respective college professors, and by others of authority in Forestry. No doubt these men would conduct their work after the most approved scientific methods.

They were husky lads, having been reared on Eastern farms prior to their short college courses. They understood handling horses after the manner of Eastern farmers, and had a knowledge of farming and stock raising, wood cutting and lumbering, in addition to the technical training which they had received at school. Both felt that they had but little more to learn, except perhaps a few little matters like packing a horse,—things that any sensible man could learn to do in a few minutes.

Still, as these trained foresters rode along the trail through that vast wilderness, they had a feeling deep down in their hearts that they were strangely out of place. They were applying their faculties in an effort to conform what they had learned from books to what Nature was now displaying to them on every hand.

Presently one spoke: "What kind of trees do you call these, Dick? They resemble the hemlock, also the balsam; but they are neither. They must be Douglas fir."

"I have been wondering about that very thing, Harry, and believe I have it. We are still up pretty high, and I remember the text books speak of the Englemann spruce growing at the higher altitudes in the West; and I have confirmed the identification by the needles. I examined one of them, and it is quadrangular, will roll between the thumb and finger, and the points are sharp and prickly."

"Yes! I remember all that dope now. Might have known you'd have it on the end of your tongue. I surely wish I could remember details like you do. I can retain the theory and science of the thing; but, when it comes to these little points, it's just like remembering dates in history, I simply can't do it. I don't suppose I could give a description of a basswood which would differentiate it from a cottonwood to save my soul. But we have it in our heads in a way anyhow, and it will only take us a few days to familiarize ourselves with these Western trees; and, as far as I can see, that is all there is for us to do out in this God forsaken wilderness.

"You know the Supervisor said there weren't any saw-mills over on this district where we are going. All we will have to do will be survey some homesteads, and camp out in the woods. I look forward to it as one continuous, joyous picnic with your Uncle Samuel's approval. And take it from me, boy, we'll have some venison this fall, if there's such a thing in these woods—and maybe a little bear meat. Hello! Here we are at the park the ranger told us about."

They had suddenly emerged from the spruce timber

into a huge mountain meadow or park. It did not look so far across, due to the vastness of everything surrounding it. The travelers were soon to be surprised, however, at the length of time that would be required to cross it.

"Isn't it strange how this timber grows thick as hair on a dog's back right down to a straight line, and then stops short and the grass begins. I can't remember reading in the text books or hearing in lectures about anything like this. It must be a freak of Nature."

Dick again had a solution for the mystery: "Possibly it's the altitude which controls it—we've been descending for a long time. Or maybe it's the soil. This has been a lake at one time, possibly countless ages ago, and that line denotes high water. I did not suppose, though, that the change in the vegetation would be so abrupt. But isn't it a beautiful spot? You see the timber grows down to a certain level all the way around."

By this time Harry had his binoculars focused and was making a more careful survey: "Can you see that little lake out there in the center of the basin? All those little streams lead into it, and the outlet is through the gap in the mountains on the other side."

"Yes, I can see the glimmer of the sun on the lake. I suppose the gap over there, where the outlet flows, is the way our trail leads. I'll bet those little streams and the lake are so full of fish their fins stick out. Let's hurry on; we're already nearing our picnic grounds."

Dick was still looking through his field glasses: "I never saw so many cattle and sheep before in my whole life! What would dad think of having a herd like that? I wonder if they all belong to one man?"

Two hours later they arrived at the shores of the little lake, and, as they dismounted, they realized that they were tired and sore. This they would realize more fully the next morning when the stiffness had settled in their muscles, but they were young and vigorous and used to strenuous exercise, so would be but little concerned about

it. These men little realized, however, what the next few days had in store for them.

This would be their first night in camp alone, and would exhaust the baked bread and canned supplies that they had brought with them. Old Mack had personally supervised the packing of their outfit and saw to it that they had the staple articles necessary. But the art of making biscuits over a camp fire was one of the simple little things that was yet to be learned by these young foresters. However, they were prepared for emergencies, for they had a little cook book with them. In fact, they had books containing all the information necessary regarding camp life and its connection with forestry.

Still Old Mack's kindly supervision in packing their equipment, and sending a ranger to pilot them to the top of the mountain so they could not well lose their way, were not taken by them as complimentary. Dick had remarked that noon at the mountain pass, after the ranger had departed: "They certainly take us to be tenderfeet, all right. Who could get lost, I'd like to know, with a compass along, to say nothing of a transit?"

As the ranger had done the packing thus far, when they unpacked their horses that evening, they observed how the ropes were lashed so as to remember how to fasten them on again the next morning.

After hobbling the horses and turning them loose, they fished in the little stream. It was no trouble to catch trout for supper. Everything was going smoothly.

After the fish had been carefully dressed, they began looking around for fuel for a camp fire. But to their great dismay none was to be found. The shores of the lake were bare, not even shrubbery anywhere in sight,—nothing but bunch grass extending out on all sides to the line where it met the timber. The distance to the timber on all other sides was greater than at the point at which they had entered the park, and they well remembered that two steady hours riding had been required to cover that distance.

Mountain trout, properly prepared, are very fine in-

deed for supper after a hard day's ride. But how was this to be accomplished without a fire? It was now becoming dark. To get their horses, saddle and pack, and go to the timber would take too long—well into the night. And besides their appetites forbade that.

To come to the point, their supper actually consisted of their last loaf of baker's bread and a can of beef. They were disappointed at not being able to cook the trout for supper, but they resolved to be up early in the morning and move camp where there was fuel to prepare their breakfast. The fish would keep. They left them in a basin of water near the shore where they had dressed them.

They were tired, so, crawling into their combination sleeping bags, they tried to sleep, but, exhausted as they were, they could not rest. The ground made a hard mattress, and their thoughts were wandering over a wide range.

As darkness began to close in on them, a feeling of loneliness and insecurity gradually crept over them. They were plucky boys. This was not their first time to camp out in the open. They had done some picnicking at home during vacation. But there was something entirely different in their feelings this evening.

Dick was first to voice his thoughts: "I wonder if that ranger was trying to give us a tip to-day or just wanted to scare us a little when he said, as he bade us good-bye: 'But don't forget, fellers, to keep one ear cocked ahead and the other backward, and keep yer eyes open. Ye'll get along all right, but jest don't forget what I'm a tellin' ye.'"

Harry laughed: "Oh! I don't know. He's a kind of simple-minded backwoodsman. I guess he thought our mothers didn't know we were out. I liked him. He meant well. You know how carefully he told us how to go, and showed us everything as if we were babes in the cradle."

To Harry this excursion into the forests of the Southwest had been started the same as a holiday from school,

partly prompted by the necessity of earning a few more dollars to complete his course, and partly to have some field experience to his credit, when he should aspire to some office in the Forest Service far above that of a common ranger.

Dick had already completed his school course, though it was not so thorough a one as Harry had planned, and he felt that this little trip into the wilderness was simply a necessary step,—perhaps the last round on the ladder,—and then he too would be at the zenith, and also occupy some high executive position.

Had not their professors and others told them repeatedly that there was a great shortage of technically trained forestry men? And that the better positions were open to them? The “rough necks” would have to give place.

So ran their thoughts. They cared little about learning the ways of the backwoods people or their occupations. The cattle and the sheep business did not interest them. They were foresters looking ahead to the time when they would be officials of high rank, supervising from handsomely furnished offices the proper use, conservation, and reproduction of the forests,—possibly after the manner of Germany or France. They were living in the blissful atmosphere of anticipation,—pleasanter by far than actual realization.

Why, then, should they not have been cheerful and optimistic? But the words of the ranger recurred to them frequently, “But don’t forget, fellers, to keep one ear cocked ahead and the other backward”; and occasionally, when they heard some little noise in the darkness, without mentioning it to the other each wished that he could have kept a fire burning all night. With no wood this was of course impossible.

They were restless. They had always been under the direct guidance of someone more experienced, and now they were alone, camped on the trail which the ranger had shown them, and which they would again follow in the morning according to his directions. The quality of

self-reliance, lying dormant within them, had not yet been called forth. Hence we shall leave them in their camp by the little lake while we, by virtue of a greater perspective, take into account some of the things which were happening about them,—a series of events that would soon begin to introduce to them certain striking phases of their new environment.

That very afternoon a forest guard had ridden along his beat,—the little trail following the crest of the main range,—and, stopping at each of the lookout points, had carefully scanned, with the aid of his binoculars, every section of the forest within range of his vision. He was “looking out” for forest fires.

For the three months since the middle of May he had been riding this beat daily. He had sighted a few fires and had reported them by telephone to the Supervisor’s office; but, except for the ranger who passed that way about once a month, he had seen no man to converse with during the entire summer. He still had sufficient supplies in his cabin for a couple more months.

At times he felt keenly the loneliness of his seclusion, the monotony of riding back and forth on that trail. He had venison jerked drying in the woods. Official as he was, he could not resist the demands of the appetite, game laws or no game laws. Grouse were plentiful. The matter of their being out of season had not greatly troubled his mind. No one would interfere with his habits. He was a free man in that respect, by reason of his location.

But he had his duty to perform, and an important one. Whether lonesome or monotonous, it was a necessary, useful occupation, and one for which he was probably best fitted,—perhaps a stepping-stone to something higher. He hoped to pass the ranger examination in the fall and secure Civil Service standing.

This particular afternoon, as he rode along his beat, he was picturing in his mind the realization of his ambitions,—when he would become a regular forest ranger, have charge of a district, and have his station with its

fenced pastures for his horses. Then he would marry the girl who was waiting,—the same old story. Man is always striving to the same end,—to build a nest to please the lady bird.

As he came to the top of one of the highest peaks on the range, he involuntarily uncased his binoculars and began scanning the country, his thoughts still uninterrupted.

Suddenly he lowered the glasses and gazed long and steadily with his naked eyes, as if to confirm what he had seen; then, replacing the glasses, he looked again.

New thoughts were now flowing through his mind in rapid succession. The monotony of that lonely ride had been broken. Action must be taken!

But what? How?

That smoke was coming up from a deep cañon away over on District Number Five. There was no telephone communication with that district. He was not familiar with the trails, if indeed there were any on that newly annexed part of the Forest. Nor did he know where the ranger lived. How could he communicate with him? All of this flashed through his mind instantly. One thing was plain. He must notify the Supervisor at once.

Turning his horse about, he spoke to it sharply and touched it with the spur by way of emphasis. The surprised animal immediately realized that its rider was in earnest, and began descending that rough trail at as fast a gait as seemed safe to itself and its rider. But this did not satisfy the man, and again he resorted to the spur and a sharper command. The horse, thoroughly aroused by the excitement of its rider, threw discretion to the wind—and on they sped.

It was only ten miles to the point where the telephone line crossed the trail. Seizing the telephone receiver in the box, he called up the Supervisor's office.

"Hello! Forest Guard Thane talking. Sighted fire on District Number Five in deep cañon due west from Lookout Point Number Fourteen!"

Back came the answer from the forest clerk: "Hold the phone; the Supervisor wishes to speak with you."

As it happened, Old Mack was in the office, and his first question was: "How much of a fire does it appear to be, Thane?"

"Quite a volume of smoke. Of course it's a long way from this lookout point, and the wind is carrying the smoke north."

"You say it's in the deep cañon directly west of Look-out Point Number Fourteen?"

Old Mack spoke to his clerk: "Get Berger's map!"

Then speaking again to Thane, he said: "That is in the Martinez Cañon. There is a world of timber on the north slope, and Berger's camp is in the next cañon south, so he may not see the smoke for days perhaps. You must notify him at once! Look at the copy of Berger's map I sent you. You have it with you?"

"Yes," Thane replied, "it's in my carrying case."

"Well," Old Mack continued, "you will see on that map where the trail that leads to Berger's camp crosses the divide. Ride to his camp at once and notify him! If you can't find him there, get men and begin to fight the fire. That's all. Good-bye!"

Forest Guard Thane hung up the receiver with a bang, and the next instant was on his way. He would pass by his station and change horses before going on, for it would be at least a sixty mile ride.

Old Mack immediately rang up Brewster's station.

No answer came. No doubt Brewster was out at that time of day.

Leaving orders with the clerk to call Brewster's station every half hour until 9.30 p.m., he returned to his inner office.

About this time Brewster was some fifteen miles from his station near the little sawmill which was cutting timber from the Forest. He was busily engaged in selecting and marking with his U. S. hatchet the trees that were to be cut.

A cowman rode up. "How-de, Brewster?"

"Fine and dandy, Sam. How are you?"

"I'm a having trouble with that dirty, low down, lousy sheepman that's got his range alongside of mine. You allotted him the range alongside of me, but the range hog runs his sheep on my allotment most as much as he does on his own. Nothing unusual for a sheepman, ye know, and, if it wasn't for this doggone Government supervision, it would be easy enough for me to handle. He wouldn't a dared done that a few years ago when this was open range. 'Course I could handle the case myself. Shootin's too good for the yellin' insect. But see'n I'm a payin' Uncle Sam for my range, I'll look to him for protection in it first."

Brewster laughed in his good-natured, whole-hearted way. "So you rode way over here to get me to go lick a sheep herder, did you?"

This was sarcasm, but Sam was quick to deny it anyway.

"Not by a damned sight! If the matter could have been settled that way without a gettin' into trouble with some o' you brass buttoned, pine tree specialists, I'd a had it settled before this."

Brewster laughed again. "I know it, Sam. You did the right thing. I'll go over with you in the morning and straighten things out for you. Maybe the sheepman is mistaken as to where his allotment line runs."

"Mistaken! Hell! 'Course he'll claim he is. A sheepman, though, is perfectly dumb, or he wouldn't be one. A man with any sense wouldn't stoop that low."

Brewster couldn't resist the temptation to stir the cattleman's ire a little deeper. "A sheepman told me the other day that the cattlemen were just a bunch of thieves. He said that they were too stingy to kill a calf, and ate mutton all the time."

"Well, the mutton part of it would be correct all right, if it wasn't for what I said before about gettin' in bad with you Government officials. You used to be a pretty decent sort of chap, Brewster, afore you got into

this here Forest Service. It's kind o' went to your head, I guess."

Brewster laughed and then said: "Well! Come over to the Station with me, and I'll show you I am still a good biscuit maker; and in the morning I will go and look that sheepman over."

An hour after dark they rode up to Brewster's station, and had barely started supper when the telephone rang.

Brewster took down the receiver and called "Hello".

Old Mack recognized Brewster's voice and replied: "Hello, Brewster. Guard Thane reported a fire this afternoon. It's in Martinez Cañon. Go at once! Organize a crew and fight it! It has quite a start already, and there's lots of timber ahead of it according to Berger's map!"

"Yes, sir; I'll start at once. Good-bye!"

Turning to the cowman he said: "Fire in Martinez Cañon! You finish gettin' something on the table to eat. There's plenty of cold chuck. I'll catch a pack horse and throw my outfit together. We'll eat a bite anyway before we start. It's an all night ride over there."

It did not take long for Brewster to get his horse. His pack and camp outfit were always ready during fire season, and the panniers were packed with provisions of all kinds. So it was but a short time—not over half an hour—until the men were mounting their horses. They were still eating, for they had only swallowed a few bites, seizing what was left and chucking it into their pockets. So, for a little distance they rode in silence while they finished their supper. Brewster was thinking about the fire and formulating his plan of attack. Finally he spoke:

"Guess I'll have to ask you to run around among the cattle and sheep camps over your way and get a few men together and bring 'em along. We are a goin' to need all the men we can get. That's a rough country over there,—no trail in on that north side. Bring all the axes and shovels you can get. And chuck of course. You'll get paid for them; and the men will be paid for the time they are gone. I will ride straight through to Mirror

Lake and visit the camps over that way. Ought to be able to get quite a crew up there. You might as well come that way, too. It's the best trail. Take the one that leads north from there. You'll strike our tracks there, so you can find us."

For the time being both men had forgotten about the sheepman's trespassing on Sam's range. They were now at the junction of the trails where Sam would turn off to go to his own camp, and he answered as he turned: "All right, Brewster, you can count on us. Good-night."

There was no moon yet, and under the canopy of the thick forest it was almost pitch dark, but the horse knew the trail, though mountain trails are no race tracks, even in broad daylight. Some of the time it was a slow walk up a long, tedious climb. Then perhaps there was a short space through an opening where a brisk trot could be taken, or even a slow lope. Then the trail led along the side of a ridge, with chasms on one side where a single misstep might put both rider and animal into eternity. Later there was the Rio del Torro to ford. Thus ran the trail, gradually climbing toward the top of the mountain range.

The "babes in the wood" at Mirror Lake had finally fallen asleep, though it had been a difficult matter.

In the early evening a range bull had wandered along the shore of the lake and nearly ran into the boys' camp. It was unusual for a camp to be there, for the reason the boys had already learned, and the bull was greatly surprised; but, nerving himself, he decided this would afford him a fine opportunity to display his authority where he was lord over all he surveyed,—unless he met a cowboy on horseback.

So he stood a few paces back from the boys, and proceeded to serenade them, bellowing, pawing, throwing dirt over his head and shoulders, and hooking the ground with his horns.

Dick sat up, with his rifle on his knees, and remained on guard until the bull had tired of the game and walked

slowly away bellowing. This had not scared the boys, as they had been used to such animals at home. But it had disturbed their sleep.

Again they tried to sleep and had only dozed away when Harry awoke with a start, just in time to catch a glimpse of some animal jumping over the panniers in its haste to escape into the darkness. Dick was also awake in a moment, for Harry was really startled this time and had whispered: "Get your gun! There's a lion."

The animal which Harry had seen was only one of a pack of sheep dogs from the neighborhood camps out on a foraging expedition. It had eaten up their fish and bacon before the boys had been aroused by it, and in the darkness Harry had mistaken it for a mountain lion.

Dick had not seen the animal and laughed at Harry, but there was no more sleep. They had left their camp outfit scattered around where they had taken it from the horses, and now they gathered it together to form a bulwark around them, and they took turns sitting on guard.

About midnight the moon came up, and the beauty of the scene should have interested these young foresters. But, though the light gave some relief, they did not notice the scenery.

Finally Dick reached for Harry's arm, pointing and whispering: "What is that coming down the trail? A horseman? Yes! What errand can be so important or urgent as to make him travel through this wilderness at night?"

On came the horse at a brisk trot. It was a weird sight, a lone horseman traveling on that lonesome trail. He stopped at the north end of the lake, dismounted, took the bit from his horse's mouth and allowed him to drink—not all he cared for—and scooping up some water in the brim of his hat, drank it after the manner known by every cowboy or rangeman. Then replacing the bridle, he remounted and passed on at the same long swinging trot at which he had come.

He had passed within a few rods of the boys' camp, but, if he noticed them, he showed no indication of it.

The words of the ranger occurred again to Harry, who said in a whisper: "Keep one ear cocked ahead and the other backward, and keep yer eyes open."

Both watched the rider until he had disappeared from sight. Then Dick, turning to Harry, whispered: "That man's on no honorable errand at this time of night. He was armed to the teeth. I could see his six shooter and rifle just as plain as if it had been day. He must be some escaping outlaw. It may have been fortunate for us he did not see us. He probably wouldn't care to have any witnesses to his night ride."

It happened that the rider was Forest Guard Thane on his way to the fire; but, as his carrying case was on the opposite side of his horse, the boys had not seen it, and so did not recognize him as a ranger.

After another few minutes' silence, Dick whispered: "I suppose there are gangs of cow thieves in this country. I have read that every stock country is more or less infested with them. I don't mind confessing that I am rather glad he was so bent on his own business that he did not notice us. The way he was riding would indicate plainly enough that he had no time to idle away."

Sleep was impossible. They did not have long to wait, however, for further excitement. Early in the evening they had noticed numerous camp fires along the edge of the timber. They had rightly decided these were the camps of the stockmen or sheep herders; but these fires had all died down early in the evening. Now one showed up again, and in a short time the next one to it was burning brightly.

Why were these people—herders, stockmen, or whoever they were—kindling their fires at that time of night? It was rather chilly, but not enough to require a fire to keep warm if one had bedding, and it surely was a most unearthly hour at which to be arising. Was the lion or wolf, or whatever it was, making a visit to the other camps also? A cow bawled,—that wild, frightened bawl of defiance and fear. Was she or her calf being attacked?

One after another the camp fires brightened up, and

they could even hear an occasional shout. After an hour or so the sounds became more audible; and a little later they could hear distinctly the rattle of saddlery and the trump, trump, of galloping horsemen. It became painfully evident, too, that they were coming straight for their camp.

About the first sentence which the boys could hear distinctly was: "Oh, they're the genuine tenderfoots. The boys was a watchin' 'em with the field glasses when they come in just before dark. Nearly busted laughin' watchin' 'em unpack."

"Well!" replied another voice, "we'll initiate 'em. They can learn to eat fire just as well now as later."

By this time the boys were thoroughly frightened, for no less than a dozen horsemen galloped up at full speed. The leader of the gang was Brewster. His appearance and manner as he rode up were such that he attracted the complete attention of the frightened boys. They had no thought of protecting themselves with their rifles or six shooters. There was something about him that forbade any such moves.

Unconsciously they concluded that he knew what he was doing and was sure he could do it. So, springing to their feet, they stood trembling. Brewster's horse came to a sudden stop within a pace or two of them. The silver bits, and the chains and other decorations on the bridle and saddle glittered in the moonlight. The others arranged themselves in a circle close around them, as if having practiced the act many times in rehearsal.

As might well be imagined by anyone who knew Brewster personally, no time was lost. In an instant he had dismounted and came forward with hand extended.

The young foresters now observed that beneath all the glitteringly ornamental Wild West paraphernalia, he wore a Forest Service uniform. As he turned slightly, the glitter of the moon's rays on that "pine tree" bronze badge confirmed their discovery. This was a Forest Ranger. Imagine their relief at this discovery.

Brewster was speaking: "Sorry to interrupt your slum-

ber, boys, but there is a little forest fire over here, and we need your help. My name is Brewster. Glad to know you. Heard you were on the way out. Pack up your outfit. There's no time to lose. We'll be organized in a few minutes."

Then, turning to two of the cowboys who were sitting on their horses grinning like hypnotized gorillas, Brewster continued: "Hank, you and Jim help these kids pack up, and bring 'em along."

Without further comment Brewster remounted and was away with the others before Dick and Harry had scarcely had time to comprehend the situation. They had enough sense to see that their awkward attempts at helping pack were only hindering the cowboys, who paid no attention to them whatever. So they just stood back and looked on dumfounded.

Not more than three minutes were consumed in the actual packing. They did not even think to saddle their horses, and only about a minute was consumed by the cowboys in doing this for them too.

As Hank handed the reins to Dick, he said in a most sarcastic drawl: "Kin I help ye up, little boy?"

This was too much for Dick, and he landed squarely on the point of Hank's chin. When Hank came down he was measuring full length on the ground.

It was now the cowboy's turn to need time to gain his composure. Dick had a powerful swing, and he had struck before he had thought. Jim,—the other cowboy,—fearing gun play when he came up, quickly removed Hank's gun from its scabbard, at the same time commanding Dick to stand back; for Dick had his fighting clothes on now and was repeating over and over to the prostrate Hank the invitation: "Kin I help ye up, little boy? Kin I help ye up, little boy?"

When Hank came to sufficiently to rise to his feet, it was with extended hand, saying rather shamefacedly: "Put 'er there, feller."

And as Hank and Dick shook hands, all joined in a hearty laugh.

By the time they caught up with Brewster, his crew had increased to fifty. All were mounted. That night ride will never be forgotten by the young foresters. When they reached the timber, Brewster took the lead, and, the whole procession fell into single file in the little narrow trail.

On the way they passed by one of the forest guard cabins, and took all of the tools and provisions stored there. A little further on they came within sight of the fire. Brewster saw from the spread it already had that it would be useless to try to check it below the top of the ridge bounding Martinez Cañon on the north, so he kept on the trail along the main range until past the head of the cañon; then he turned west down that ridge. There was no trail along this side ridge, but at that high altitude the timber was not so dense but what the procession could worm its way through, by jumping fallen logs occasionally.

At daylight Brewster called a halt and, passing quickly among the men, assigned the tasks. They were to establish a temporary camp there and cook breakfast. A trail would have to be cut through the forest near the top of the ridge. Part of the men were assigned to begin that work at once, while breakfast was being prepared. To the newcomers he delegated the important duty of keeping the cook supplied with wood and water. This was a humble duty to be sure, but someone had to do it. So the young foresters fell to with a will, and made use of the opportunity this afforded to learn something of camp cooking.

CHAPTER XX

THE FOREST FIRE

About this time, or perhaps an hour earlier, Forest Guard Thane arrived at Berger's camp just as he and Hardy were crawling out of bed. Hardy had come back to camp the day before. His arm was still in a sling, but he had ridden for several days and, everything considered, was progressing nicely.

Thane had no more than time to state his business when a Mexican came in on the same errand. The fire was spreading rapidly, and the Mexicans were becoming alarmed and had sent a messenger to inform the rangers.

Berger immediately went for the horses while Hardy prepared breakfast. Hardy insisted on having a horse brought in for him. While eating they made their plans. Hardy and Thane decided to go by way of the trail over the ridge,—the one that Hardy had tracked the mule rider over,—and Berger would go down to the white settlements for more men and tools and food.

A few hours later they all met at the placeta in Martinez Cañon, and by that time half of the population had assembled. Hardy had decided, as had Brewster, that it would be useless to try to check the fire short of the top of the ridge bounding Martinez Cañon on the north. The best way to reach the top of that ridge from where they were would be from the lower end. And so about the time Brewster's crew was well organized and busily cutting a trail along the ridge from the top, Hardy's crew began from the bottom. It is needless to say that there had been no time lost by either Berger or Hardy, for only a few hours had elapsed since they had received the news, and many miles of travel had been covered in collecting and organizing their crews.

Along toward noon the wind began blowing and the heat fanned it into a gale, driving the dense black smoke over the ridge where they were giving battle. It was only a question of a few hours until the fire would reach the top of the ridge, and from that point the sparks might blow far over into the next cañon.

All of the old dead stubs and trees had to be felled and burned before the fire could set them ablaze. In short, a "fire line" had to be run along this ridge. This was made on the opposite side of the ridge from the forest fire and perhaps three hundred yards below the crest.

First a trail was cleared. From this trail all inflammable material was scraped back and all trees cut. Then a fire was started and allowed to burn, under their watchful guidance, everything between the trail and the crest of the ridge. It was hoped that this charred black space would be too wide for the fire to jump when the main forest fire reached the top of the ridge.

The ax men were in the lead cutting out the trail. Then came the men with rakes and shovels, and behind them the firing crew. The camp cook was back at the beginning of the trail, where it was thought the base of supplies would be safe. The horses were taken to the valley below and carefully watched. There were duties for everyone, and Hardy and Berger and Thane were riding up and down that line making its organization as efficient as possible. Carriers on horseback brought food and drink to the men on the line. There could be no quitting their post for any reason. This was a battle royal, and it must be fought there and then. The enemy was advancing and would give no quarter.

On Brewster's end of the line, all unbeknown to Hardy and Berger and Thane, the same thing was taking place. The two crews of men were destined to meet somewhere on that ridge in the terrible smoke, blistering heat and deafening roar. As time went on, the smoke from the advancing fire was becoming denser and denser.

Have you ever been on a fire line in a forest in front

of an advancing fire? If not, you will never know what kind of a battle these men were fighting. They themselves could not have described it after it was over.

From assistants to the cook the young foresters were promoted to food and water carriers to the men on the fire line,—possibly the most important duty in connection with fighting a forest fire. No matter what obstacles are encountered, the food and water must be taken through; for men cannot work under such terrible conditions unless with food and water,—especially water.

The first point where the forest fire reached the fire line was between the main crew and cook camp. Here the boys had to "run the gauntlet" through the smoke and heat to get the food and water to the men.

The fire line was doing the work. Only occasionally did a spark blow across and start a fire on the other side. When it did, men who were on the lookout quickly put it out.

But as the forest fire burned up to the fire line, the distance through which the boys had to run the gauntlet continually grew longer, and the heat more intense,—especially at places opposite some fallen logs which were still burning. Brewster rode back and forth, all the time keeping close watch of all phases of the situation, shifting men here and there as necessity demanded.

This was an important period in the fight. If he could prevent the fire from jumping the line back of the men and still keep a crew cutting out the trail and making a fire line ahead where the forest fire would soon come to meet it, then possibly he could check its advance. After the line was run all the way down the ridge, he could control it even with exhausted men.

Brewster realized the danger confronting the young foresters. He was afraid that the heat and smoke would overcome them, and suggested that he relieve them with other men; but they would not hear of it.

In the Southwest forest fires seldom run in the tops of the green trees, except in the spruce under stress of

high winds. It is the refuse on the ground—dry needles and leaves, dead timber, brush, and undergrowth—that burns. This kind of a fire is known as a ground fire. It cleans everything from the forest floor, leaving the larger live trees standing with no greater damage than fire scars about the butts.

This was thus far a ground fire, but on the upper end of the ridge there was an old burn; that is, an area where fire had passed through at some previous time and killed the spruce trees without consuming them. This dead timber had stood for years and had become seasoned and dry as tinder. Some of it had rotted at the ground and fallen. When the fire reached this,—as it eventually would if not checked from that side before long,—the conflagration would be too great even to try to fight. Adjacent to this dead timber, therefore, a much wider fire line had to be cleared and burned over.

The frightened wild animals of the forest were crossing the line, fleeing before the fire, but no one paid any attention to them. Few of the men, except the rangers who were mounted, carried arms.

As the day advanced, the wind increased. Some of the less hardy men were beginning to tire out. Neither Hardy nor Brewster now expected to be able to put the fire line through ahead of the fire. The wind was giving the advantage to the fire, and the heat and smoke were becoming almost unendurable. Nevertheless each, not knowing of the other, decided to fight along the ridge as long as possible, or until the fire jumped it and passed on to the other side. In that event the fire fighters might run down the slope to the creek and begin a new fire line.

There was not much danger of their being trapped, but in their excitement many were taking unwarranted risks. There was a forlorn hope that the wind might yet blow up a rain. Even a shower would help. At least their fire line might keep the fire from cutting so wide a swath, for it could not jump the line at all points; and they would again be able to head it off at the creek or on the downward slope, as fire does not travel so fast down

hill. If possible, however, it must be stopped on the crest of the ridge.

Along toward midnight men, black with smoke, with singed hair and eyebrows, burned cheeks and parched lips, staggering along that fire line cutting, raking, shoveling, back firing, fighting in mad desperation, began to meet other men, strangers to them, working as they were working, looking as they were looking.

Then Brewster, riding down the line with food and water and encouragement for his men, met another horseman. He had not seen this horseman before. Who was he? None of his crew except the young foresters was mounted.

Neither horseman was able to see plainly, as the smoke and the condition of their bloodshot eyes made it impossible. But, as they rode up close to each other, Blair yelled out: "Hello! Brewster. For God's sake, give me some water! There's a poor devil down the line there what's swallowed a right smart excessive quantity o' smoke. An' it's plumb interferin' with his pulminary mastication. He's plumb oxfisticated!"

Brewster handed him a water bag, and Blair whirled his horse and rode back down the line, Brewster following. A short distance and they came to the prostrate form of a man lying in a sheltered spot to one side of the fire line, where Blair had dragged him before going in search of water. Blair poured some water in his hand and sprinkled it over the man's face and carefully poured a little into his mouth.

"My God! Is he dead?" said Blair. Then rolling him on his face he frantically pounded him on the back.

"Hold on, Blair! That's no use. Roll him over on his back again, and I will work his arms up and down while you sprinkle his face. He's not dead."

After a few minutes of this exercise the man opened his eyes and looked wildly about him and cried deliriously: "We've got to cut it, boys. We've got to!"

"Who is he?" Brewster asked. "I thought I knew

all of the white men in the country, but he's sure a stranger to me."

"You've got me. I'm right ignorant. When I hove into sight, he was a choppin' at that thar burnin' stub over yonder," pointing to a spot on the opposite side of the fire line, "an' jest as I got opposite, it fell; an' instantly he plumb lost his consciousness an' jest tottered over. The smoke an' ashes an' heat jest naturally overcame his overtaxed resistance an' exhausted his endurance. God! but it's right lucky that I happened to appear on the scene o' emergency—kind o' miraculous act o' Providence. That thar stub in fallin' jest covered him with burnin' coals an' ashes. An' he would a been teetotally incinderated in a few minutes."

During this conversation, Brewster continued to work his arms up and down and Blair poured him a drink from the water bag. In the dense smoke and darkness they could only catch a glimpse of the man when the wind fanned the fallen tree to a blaze for an instant. The stub was nearly burned up. But occasionally remnants of it burst forth in flame and shed a light on the man.

In one of these intervals Brewster caught sight of the badge on his shirt bosom. "He's a Service man, Blair. Who in hell is he?"

"Must be one of them thar new men Old Mack's a sendin' over to Hardy's District," Blair responded.

Brewster was about to explain that that could not be, when the man removed his lips from the water bag and spoke. "I'm just the poor, locoed ignoramus what didn't have no better sense than to start somethin' he couldn't finish." Then suddenly realizing that this was not enlightening his rescuers as to his identity, he hurriedly added: "My name is Thane," and was in a dead faint again.

Brewster spoke now with full comprehension of the situation: "He's not choked now. He's just simply played out."

Blair was again sprinkling water on his cheeks as

Brewster continued: "What he needs is whiskey when he comes to next time." Pulling forth a leather covered flask from an inner pocket where it was reposing and had been for a month or more awaiting such an occasion, he stood with it in hand, awaiting the return to consciousness of the man, at the same time continuing his conversation:

"This man is the forest guard up at Baldy Lookout Station. He discovered this fire and rode to report it to Berger. That explains the fire line being cut through from here."

"Yes," Blair interrupted, "ther's a right smart crew of men below here, but I don't rightly comprehend who is in charge of 'em. Jest naturally supposed it was Berger, it a bein' on Hardy's district, an' he a laid up in bed. Right here is where his an' my fire lines came together, an' that thar old stub was a burnin' like mad. It was a goin' to throw fire clear across the line in spite of hell an' high water, if he hadn't waded in thar an' cut it down jest when he did. It's right obvious now how it all"—

Just then the man opened his eyes and yelled: "Did I finish my job, fellers? Did I get it cut in time?"

Brewster pressed the bottle to his lips. "You sure did, feller, an' the line is holdin'."

Down the ridge Hardy's and Berger's crews were fighting desperately. While their line was cut through, it was only a narrow strip, and the fire was raging at all points. The fire had jumped the line in several places and the fight was intense.

Hardy was riding like mad up and down the line issuing orders, when he met a runaway horse coming down the line. His first thought was to "pull down" his rope and throw the noose over the running animal's head. But, with one arm in a sling and only a few seconds in which to act, the horse had passed before he could accomplish this. But he had recognized the horse as the one Thane had been riding. Thus it happened

that, as Brewster and Blair were carefully nursing Thane back to consciousness, Hardy appeared on the scene and learned for the first time of the presence of Blair and Brewster and their crews, and that the fire line was complete along the ridge.

The intensity of the fight being somewhat lessened for the time, the men began to gather about the disabled man. It was found that he was quite badly burned on the hands and other places about his body where the fire had burned through his clothing before Blair could drag him to a place of safety and extinguish the flames with dirt.

Leaving Thane in the care of these men, Hardy, Blair, and Brewster held a brief conference and decided they must ride the whole length of the line at once. The fire might yet get beyond their control, for the men were now relaxing their vigilance upon learning that the line was complete. Men were rushed down to Hardy's end of the line to assist, where the fire was now the worst.

To give in detail the remaining operations would constitute a book in itself. The most exhausted men were gathered into groups and allowed to rest, a half dozen here and a dozen there, watched over by others, as they immediately dropped into a dead sleep of exhaustion.

There were burns to dress. All of the Service men carried first aid packets, and the new men were found to be very handy at this work, too. Brewster noticed their exhausted condition, however, and commanded them to rest. Dick had quite a severe burn on the side of his face where a burning branch had fallen against him while running the gauntlet with food and water for the others.

Sam and his crew of cowboys had arrived on the scene some hours later than Brewster's crew, so Brewster put Sam in charge while he took a few hours' sleep himself.

The next day and night and the next and the next, and for ten successive days and nights, the vigilance and fight had to be kept up. During those days the wind changed several times, and fire lines had to be cut on all sides before victory was assured. The last three or four

days only a few men remained, riding back and forth and around the fire on all sides, shoveling dirt on any smoldering stumps or logs near the edge of the burned area.

The second day after Blair's arrival he passed along the line distributing nicely cooked bear meat. He was called upon later to explain this and other things, including the presence of venison in camp.

This calling to account happened one evening after the forest fire was well under control. The rangers had dropped into Hardy's and Berger's camp, as that had become headquarters for the men. Everyone felt at home there, and for a few days, between times when not riding around the burned area, they had been loafing about the camp telling tales while resting up.

Supper was over and pipes and cigarettes were in action. The men were lounging in various positions of ease on the pelts and saddle blankets about the camp fire. Hardy lay propped against his saddle as usual. His arm was out of the sling. The new foresters were present, and their initiation into their chosen field was taking place, although they were unconscious of this, and did not know that some of the yarns spun by the old rangers were solely for their benefit.

On this particular evening Blair was in a narrative mood, not that that was anything unusual, but there had been so much excitement about the fire that he had not before had a fair opportunity to start his usual line of stories. To-night, however, he had the floor, so to speak. Hardy had asked him how he had happened to reach the scene of the fire just in time to save the day and how he had happened to secure the venison. He liked to hear Blair's tales.

"Well, I'll tell ye, fellers; it was this way," started Blair. "Me an' one o' Don Antonio's caporals was a trailin' a bunch o' them thar ornery sheep thievin' outlaws up over Cruces Mountain an' sighted the smoke. An' me a knowin' Hardy was laid up, an' Berger even worse,

—bein' head over heels in love,—'course there was nothin' fer me to do 'ceptin' to move this way.

"Was delayed a few minutes in gettin' started. Come onto a poor sheep herder what had got a right smart bite from one o' them thar hydrophobia skunks, an' was about to inoculate the hull outfit. He was a frothin' at the mouth some considerable, and a gnashin' his teeth, an' a grindin' 'em together, makin' a noise somewhat similar to a bass fiddle in distress. Had to rope the poor devil an' hogtie 'im in order to administer treatment."

Here Harry interrupted, open eyed with wonder: "What treatment could you administer?"

"Why! Me an' the caporal I mentioned afore was a chavin' terbaccaer, an', as per custom, we simply slapped our cuds on the wound an' bound 'em on. Couldn't wait ter see whether he came out of it or not. Probably not, fer they seldom ever do. It's right nigh always fatal, ain't it, Brewster?"

"Never knew of but one to recover, and he was not bitten much," Brewster solemnly replied.

"But I was about to narrate to ye," Blair continued, solemnly turning to Harry, "as how I happened to be present at this here forest fire. After tyin' up an' treatin' the hydrophobia sheep herder as I mentioned, so there was no chance o' his infectin' the hull population tharabouts, I rode fer the fire, an' along in the shank o' the next evenin' come down the slope yonder. I could see the smoke on tother slope where ye fellers had yer fire lines started both from above an' below, so made straight fer the opening betwixt 'em. I left the hombres what I'd picked up along the way makin' camp down on the creek, an' rode straight fer that gap. An' ye know, I've had some right pert experiences in this here wilderness heretofore, if ye will pardon me fer so sayin'; but never in my whole natural life have I met so many o' them thar wild creatures o' the forest as I met up with that thar day a comin' up that slope.

"'Pears the fire jest drove 'em through that thar gap betwixt the fire lines, fer as I was a comin' up that thar

slope the woods was simply alive—just an army o' them thar hydrophobia skunks. I don't 'spect I'm right cowardly, but ye can take it from me, feller, that the fluid in my veins was runnin' cold and then hot. Just havin' seen that thar poor pised sheep herder might o' jarred me nerves some considerable, but I was a watchin' right smart an' shootin' right rapid to keep my hoss from gettin' bit. An' I'm tellin' ye, feller, he was scared jest as bad as me.

"I'm a tellin' ye, fellers, them thar hydrophobia skunks is meaner'n strychnine. Well! Them thar skunks was only the beginnin' of the percession. I had no more 'an passed 'em fore I run into a mixed outfit o' coyotes an' mountain lion an' timber wolves, bear an' deer, an' I couldn't right well tell you what all. But I'm tellin' ye, fellers, that thar percession would a made Noah's collection look like domestic tranquility. But with dodgin' hydrophobias an' all I was right nervous, an' had no idea what I was a doin' 'cept I knew I was tryin' to perfect myself an' hoss. I wasn't out on no huntin' expedition, fellers; but that thar bear ye all have been a eatin' jest didn't take the trouble to turn out an' give me even half o' the right o' way. He was a comin' down that thar slope like as if the devil was after 'im, an' so I jest had to bore 'im to save myself from destruction. An' first thing I know'd I didn't know nothin', an' was jest a shootin' in all directions, an' that accounts fer how I happened to kill that thar deer.

"Ye know I wouldn't think o' committin' such an unlawful act as to shoot a deer out o' season. But don't ye think the circumstances would appear to indicate the innocence an' insophistication o' the guilty culprit, and in case I was arrested and brought before the bars o' justice tend to excite the inclemency o' the court?" looking solemnly into Harry's eyes and continuing his narrative without allowing any reply to his query.

"Ye see, it was jest a pure unadulterated accident, unavoidable because o' the extraordinary circumstances,—nerves a bein' shot, ye understand; me locoed an' scared

plumb senseless. Wouldn't have been surprised to have caught myself frothin' at the mouth any minute, an' was expectin' my hoss to develop signs of hydrophobia, too.

"I only wonder that I didn't shoot him in the panic. But, when I came on top o' the ridge and found Thane cuttin' down that thar burnin stub, somethin' went click in the back o' my head an' I was myself again. How that crew o' hombres I'd piloted in to fight that thar fire ever got there, I don't rightly comprehend; but they were there on the job. One of 'em told me afterwards that I jest simply shot a path right up through that thar army o' wild varmints, an' they followed peacefully along in my wake."

Hardy interrupted in his honest drawl: "Sounds most awful fishy, Blair, but I reckon there was some wild animals passin' through that gap."

Here Berger broke in with the comment: "The bear meat and venison should be sufficient evidence of that."

Brewster turned the subject back to hydrophobia skunks. "I've seen some mighty big bands of those phobia skunks, when there wasn't any fire to drive them out. They run in bands a whole lot, especially at this season. They kind of hole up together in the rocks for the winter. Take a cliff like that one there," pointing to the rocks jutting out just back of the camp, "and maybe a hundred of them will choose that for winter quarters, if they can find a cave to crawl into."

There were several caves just back of the camp, and it was not unexpected to see the new foresters turn their glances over their shoulders in that direction.

"But," continued Brewster, "I never felt much afraid of them. A good horse can outrun one of them easy enough, though they're plenty spry on foot. They make a pretty small mark for a six shooter when your horse is on the run, but you can hit them often enough to get by.

"What I dread more is centipedes and tarantulas and scorpions—those fuzzy little devils. They're too small to hit with a bullet and too sneakin' to chase you, but

just come crawling into your bed at night. You know George Hinsley," turning to Blair, "who punched cows for the J I X outfit, he bit the dust because of one of them varmints crawling into his pants legs during the night. And when I say 'bit the dust', that is just what I mean, for he laid down in the dirt there by the camp fire and writhed and twisted and turned on his belly and just chewed the dirt and ashes. I hope never to witness such a sight again."

Hardy drawled: "They're most awful bad, but a 'side winder' or a gila monster chills my blood worse. If a feller don't die the first time he gets bit by a tarantula or a scorpion, he kind of gets immune. They don't bother me no more."

Blair substantiated Hardy's statement. "It's just a difference in folks, Hardy. Some folks don't get pised easy. Now them thar greasers, nothin' will pisin 'em 'cept a centipede; 'course that's instant death to any mortal."

Dick had read of the gila monster but a short time before, and asked: "Are there gila monsters here? I thought they were on the Gila River down in Arizona and nowhere else."

Blair replied: "They're not right numerous here, but I have run up agin' a few here an' thar. It's too late in the season for 'em. But speakin' about gila monsters an' all them other varmints reminds me o' yer predecessors,— them thar young fellers that Old Mack sent out jest afore ye fellers. Ye probably hearn tell as how they come up again' the old man Hamilton an' decided to take the back trail. Hamilton is a natural born elaborator, an' he told the boys too much about the country. There ain't no use tellin' newcomers everything ye know. Give 'em a chance to learn by observation an' experience, same as us.

"But what I was about to tell ye, ye know them thar fellers started back ter go to the Supervisor's office, an' among other things Hamilton told 'em o' a short cut what they'd ought to have traveled a comin' out, an'

they allowed they'd take that goin' back; an' they got them there pints kind o' twisted around on that thar compass they was a carryin'—an' about a week later they landed over on my district.

"They was right pleased fellers to run up agin' a white man. They'd got jest about as locoed as the sheep herder what went crazy turnin' a square quilt around tryin' to find out the long way—or about the same way I was when I met up with them thar phobia varmints.

"But what I was a goin' to say, they was sure plumb locoed; fer, when I come up agin' 'em, they was a actually arguin' as to whether the sun was a settin' or risin'.

"One said if it was a settin', why it was a settin' in the east, an' tother was a contradictin' 'im sayin' it was due west. I rode out o' the brush on ter 'em an' stopped an' took natural observations, not knowin', of course, whether they was jest common hoss thieves or some o' them thar misguided tourists with a right smart touch o' phobia maybe. But it was registered all over their outfit jest what they was, so infernal plain that even in my excitement at meetin' white men it was right nigh impossible fer me to misidentify 'em.

"Well! What I started to tell ye fellers was that them thar fellers had had some right pert experiences with some o' these here varmints we've been discussin' this evenin'. So I took 'em to the top o' the main range an' panted their noses down hill an' told 'em to descend until they got to the foot of the mountain, no matter whether the sun set in the north, east, south, or west; an' every time they took a look at that thar infernal, overgrown, complicated, pervaricatin', wapper jawed compass what they called a transom"—

Harry corrected, "Transit."

Blair repeated "Transit",—to jest tell it it was a damned liar an' keep right on down the hill. An' I loaned 'em my hair lariat to wind round their camp o' nights so's to fence off them thar pisinous varmints what are thicker 'an hair on a dog over on that thar south end

o' the mountains, 'specially down in the foothills. That's why I didn't have a hair rope with me when I arrived at the scene o' this here fire. If I'd a had it, I would a felt safer, fer I could a wound it round me on the ground, an' maybe my hoss, an' just waited fer the percession to pass.

"But, say, them thar fellers sure had their appetites with 'em when I met up with 'em. They'd plumb forgot to put any matches in their packs, an' the supply they had in their pockets had been out a right smart while. They'd camped in the dark an' chawed raw bacon an' dried fruit an' flour—an' chewed leaves. I once read a little book called 'Back to Nature' an' them thar fellers had been a rehearsin' the principal parts in that thar book right smart,—kind o' unconsciously fer several days previous.

"Their hosses—ye know hosses have got lots o' hoss sense—had made up their minds that their masters had become disjinted in the upper story, an' they were plumb afraid. They was a tryin' to take the fellers back where they came from all right, but that jest precipitated a quarrel which had become chronic and protracted betwixt 'em an' the boys. Poor fellers—'peared like right clever fellers. Jest got out o' their regular channels a bit, I allow. Didn't ye hear anything about them thar fellers?"

Harry answered with right hearty merriment: "I should say not. They didn't say a word about it. We met them in Kansas City when we were coming out, and they told us that it was a nice country out here, but that they had decided they were not quite prepared to take up the work in the field, and were returning East to go to school again."

Everyone laughed, and Brewster, who was sitting close to Berger, said in an undertone to him: "That explains why Old Mack sent these fellers out by that roundabout trail, so they wouldn't meet Hamilton."

And so the nightly conversations drifted on, the foregoing being only a sample. Each night brought up an

entirely new subject. The camp fire dialogues were always carried on with the view to enlightening the young foresters, and were rehearsed in substance during the day while the boys were out for a ride around the smouldering burned area or elsewhere.

Blair took them out one day and narrated the whole history of District Number Five and the embellishments that he applied unstintingly to the tale would have made Hamilton blush with shame and forever hold his peace thereafter.

Their target practice was a revelation to the new foresters, as it had been to the Mexicans. Whenever in preparing a meal or while eating, a can was emptied, it was tossed into the air with the command "Shoot!" and it seldom reached the ground without being pierced by a bullet. Berger had now become proficient at this trick.

He was not always present though, as he had much unfinished business to look after about the district. Since Hardy had become disabled, all of the work had of course fallen upon him; but all trails led the same way for him. The blind passion of love had full control. The young medical student had long since received a letter from his sister bearing the sad news, so he stated, of his mother's illness, and he had returned to the city.

Hardy had asked Virginia, with a glimmer of roguishness in his sincere countenance: "Do you reckon Berger was the cause of his mother's illness?"

"Why! What do you mean, Mr. Hardy? How absurd!" she had innocently replied.

Hardy explained: "You know Berger is a student of mental telepathy, an' it occurred to me he might have exercised his influence over the old lady."

"Why! Mr. Hardy, you don't really and truly believe in anything like that—that is—you know—that anyone can exercise power over another—as er—for instance"—

Hardy was controlling his expression now, and seriously replied: "Never did believe much in that sort o' thing, Virginia; but I've observed that this man Berger

has wonderful powers along that line at close range—an' I just reckoned maybe"—

"You shut up! You mean thing! He has no such power at all."

And Hardy had broken out in a roar. When he really was in a jocular mood, there was no half expression to his hearty laugh.

About that time Hardy had recovered sufficiently to take leave of the kind hospitality and care which he had received at the new settler's home, and went to his camp, and he had not since had the opportunity to be an eye witness of Berger's influence over the fair lady.

But such influence had been exerting itself, both when Berger was present and when he was absent. And, now that Berger was about to leave in accordance with Old Mack's orders, and give place to his successor, that subtle influence, indefinable by word or pen, was emphasized, and only one termination seemed possible.

In the company of the older rangers, the young forestry men were really enjoying themselves. Hardy had taken them out over the district a time or two and tried to inform them regarding the work, as Old Mack had instructed him to do. But, failing to interest them in the least, he gave up in despair and fell back upon the only alternative,—that of reciting tales of adventure and corroborating and confirming the wild tales already told them by Blair and Brewster. Why not? That was what they were looking for—the only thing that interested them.

In the security of the older rangers' company, the young rangers were having the picnic that their dreams had anticipated. Even to these inexperienced youngsters it was plainly evident that the older men were completely masters of the situation,—apparently feared, respected, and admired by all whom they met.

But the time soon came for the party to break up. The fire had passed all danger of breaking out again. Thane had recovered from his injuries sufficiently to go

back to his lonely vigil. Brewster and Blair felt the call of duties awaiting them on their respective districts. Hardy and Berger must now comply with Old Mack's orders, which circumstances, over which they had no control, had so long prevented them from doing. All the old rangers realized that this was in all probability the last time they would be assembled either in work or play.

One of their number, Dennis, had already been transferred to another department of the Government. Incidentally, it might be mentioned that his transfer had been the direct result of some private correspondence between Old Mack and the inspector whom Dennis had so inadvertently held up, and who had much influence in Washington official circles.

A new regime was to replace the old, and no one now realized this more keenly than the old rangers in the field. Perhaps they delayed breaking camp a few days on that account. Were they to be thrown aside like worn-out boots? Or was it the steam roller of progress?

Little did these men think or care about such questions. They were self-reliant men, capable of turning their abilities to good use in other channels if need be. Why should they worry about the complication of factors ever present and necessary in order to keep the proper balance in the advancement of the national aims,—the ideals of a civilized people? They had fulfilled their duties faithfully in the main, in the pursuance of Old Mack's orders. That was enough. Now their ways were to part.

CHAPTER XXI

BERGER'S LOVE STORY

Berger's love story? Oh, yes! That must be told. No book would be complete without a love story.

But why tell it in detail? He who has not had the experience could not understand; and he who has experienced love, what can he be told about it?

Pick up any novel and read someone's attempt to describe the emotions of lovers,—the mating of two beings—and it is the same old story,—nothing new—the same old, old story, told and retold and still untold.

But the circumstances and incidents in connection with Berger's love affair must be told, in brief at least, before this story is finished.

We can skip lightly over the chance meeting at the prairie schooner, when Berger fell in love at first sight,—how or when or where lovers meet never matters. It is what follows.

The big celebration at which Berger gallantly saved her life, and cut out, for the time being, his rival, the young medical student, has already been described in part. That, too, was only a preliminary part of no great importance, when love was still young. Let us pass on.

On the claim adjoining "Dad's" (Dad was Virginia Ashton's father, of course) there had settled a young man of thrift and industry,—a prosperous farmer in embryo. "Had settled" is the proper term, for it was quite evident that he had come to stay, that he was going to make this his permanent home.

With him he had brought fine horses, cattle, hogs, and poultry, and had immediately set about improving his place. He had money to hire some of the work done, and he himself worked from sunrise to sundown. He did not build a little cabin like most of the bachelor

homesteaders, but instead was building a log house containing several rooms. It was plain enough that he did not intend to live alone long. For what would a bachelor do with such a large house?

So speculation arose among the neighbors, the few white families who formed the little settlement, as to who would be Wilburn's helpmate. Was he engaged? Would he send for her soon? Or who was to share his home?

But he was uncommunicative. He came over to Dad's place quite frequently, ostensibly to borrow some tools, and he would chat for a few minutes regarding business matters, stock, or the country's farming possibilities. Dad and he became close friends.

During this time Berger had of course been calling almost daily to see how Hardy was progressing, and had so far advanced in his courtship of Virginia that the young medical student had departed. She and Berger were taking long horseback rides together. At first Dad did not approve of this, for he had heard so many wild tales of the actions of the rangers at the Mexican bailes,—and in fact everywhere among the Mexican peoples,—that he did not know whether Berger was to be trusted or not.

It will be remembered that only the month before the rangers were all riding about with chips on their shoulders inviting trouble. They had been trying to live up to the reputation Old Ortega had given them,—not knowing that Ortega had given in to Old Mack. In fact they had been conducting a reign of terror, and everyone was afraid of them, even Tom Cady. The caporal who had boasted of killing Hardy had not been seen since the day he had met what he thought was Hardy's ghost in the Mayor Domo's office.

Then came the forest fire, which had kept Berger away for several days. During this period Dad had invited Wilburn over for Sunday dinner, and, needless to say, the invitation was accepted. Wilburn came dressed in his very best, and before the day was over had made a very favorable impression. He was well educated and

by no means a "rube". He demonstrated the fact, too, that he could talk about other matters besides hogs and chickens, when occasion demanded. Even Virginia was impressed and greatly enjoyed his company, though she never once thought of him as *her company*.

Of course he received a cordial invitation to call often. This he did, and it was not long before his intentions were evident enough. Had there still been any doubt, the arrival of a brand new topped carriage at his place would have dispelled it. Virginia received an invitation to go buggy riding which she accepted.

It was a pleasure to ride behind that sprightly span of slick sorrels with their shiny and fancily decorated harness. Wilburn spoke nothing of love, but he was a jolly fellow and a good conversationalist. His quick wit and ever ready anecdotes amused her greatly. And, as chance would have it, they were both laughing uproariously as a turn in the road through the forest suddenly brought them face to face with Berger.

There was scarcely more than time for recognition before they had passed. The thoughts of Berger or Virginia and their conversation at their next meeting will not be set forth here. Nevertheless, the buggy rides did not stop.

It was nearing the final day of the watchful waiting for the last spark of the forest fire to die out, before the rangers could break camp and all go their various ways. There were not many days left for Berger to spend in Ranger District Number Five, so, when he was in the company of Virginia, he made the most of his time. His conversation was all aimed at the same subject—love. Their long rides were too short for him fully to realize and express himself,—to arrive at the vital point. She seemed to be as much in love with him as he was with her; but no—not quite. There was a reserve, a barrier, which had not been broken. Or was Berger jealous?

He felt sure of her love. But why did she enjoy the company of another fellow? If she loved him as he loved

her, she surely would not. He could think of no other girl but her.

These thoughts occupied most of his waking hours—and many of them were while he was lying snugly rolled in his blankets, the other rangers sound asleep all about him. When he was returning from one of these long rides with her, or when he was starting on another, the same question was on his mind.

A few short weeks ago there had seemed to be perfect understanding between them. They had felt so sure of each other. He had put off speaking to her of marriage, from week to week, hoping to better perfect his plans. Then it had seemed so unnecessary to be betrothed at that time, since he could not marry for a year or so, until he had advanced to a better position. She was so young that the delay would not matter, and he could wait. But now it seemed imperative that the matter be settled at once. He could not think of leaving without a spoken understanding—and there was that reserve lately on her part that seemed to make this almost impossible.

The day before he and Hardy were planning to leave he called at the homestead. In fact, he had called every day lately, but this was to be the day when he would ask the fatal question. He must have the matter settled before he left, must know his future. But Dad curtly informed him: "She went a buggy ridin', an' we don't much look foh her back till in the evenin'."

If Dad had dropped the matter at that, perhaps a romance would have ended then and there, but Cupid had other plans. Dad, too, had had a matter on his mind much of late. He likewise had decided to have an understanding, once and for all. And now this seemed to be the proper place and time. He was not a diplomat naturally, and certainly his training had not greatly increased his tact. So without consideration he blurted out:

"Yuh can hang round a bit an' visit with me an' the old lady a spell, if yuh want to, but I'm a goin' to tell yuh one thing—an' that is, yuh are a wastin' time a

shinin' round our daughtah. We'uns ain't a raisin' daughtahs fer the likes o' yuh."

This came to Berger as a thunderbolt from the clear sky—the second one within the minute. He had dismounted and dropped his reins, thinking he would step out to the kitchen and chat a few minutes with his future mother-in-law, in order to cover up his discomfiture at finding his "intended" gone. He enjoyed chatting with the old lady anyway; she always made him feel at ease.

It had been some time since he had been able to carry on a conversation with the old man without a strained feeling. It seemed as though their topics of conversation were limited to the weather. And now like a flash the reason for it came to him. Why had he not thought of it before? His brain was working fast enough now.

He was about to pick up the reins to mount and ride away in disgust, ignoring the old man completely, when the thought flashed through his mind: "Did that last remark imply an insult?—'We'uns aint a raisin' daughtahs fer the likes o' yuh'." He was not in the habit of taking insults from anyone. He would demand an explanation. Turning hotly on the old man he said: "Explain yourself! What have you against me?"

"Nothin' at all—nothin' personal. Yuh all ken hang 'round a bit and visit with me an' the old lady a spell if yuh want tuh. But yuh all ain't the kind o' man foh tuh keep company with Virginia."

The last sentence had again repeated the implication. Berger advanced a step, fire flashing in his eyes.

"What do you mean by saying I am not the kind of man to keep company with your daughter? Have I not treated her as a gentleman should treat a lady? Have I"—

"Now don't ovahheat yuhself, boy. Yuh all ain't a talkin' tuh no Mexican. As I told yuh befoh, I ain't got nothin' personal agin yuh—but the way yuh all run 'round an' lord it ovah 'em—yuh rangers in general—ain't nothin' tuh yuh credit. Don't make no mistake now, boy, yuh all ain't a talkin' to no Mexican."

It was perfectly evident to Berger that he was not talking to a Mexican. An irate old Southerner, and a Confederate veteran at that, is not the sort to try to stare out of countenance.

But what completely nonplussed and disarmed him was the fact that there was truth in what the old man said. His conduct on some occasions had not been entirely creditable, and no doubt the accounts the old man had heard were worse. So it was *his* glance that wavered, instead of the old man's.

He was not afraid of the old man, but his sound reason and good sense were overcoming the temporary fit of irritation. He now realized that he had become a little "overheated"; that he really had no cause to be angry—no spotless reputation to defend. His innate sense of fair-mindedness recognized the justice of the old man's position.

But this did not diminish his love for Virginia—did not lessen his desire for her. In fact, every obstacle interposed was having directly the opposite effect. He was not as unworthy as the old man thought.

Only a few seconds elapsed while all of these things were flashing through his mind; but before he had formulated a reply, or decided upon a plea to present in defense of his case,—for defense it now was,—the old man was again speaking:

"Jest draw up a chee-ah thah in the shade o' the shack, an' set down an' cool off a bit, boy. We all ken talk a spell. The old lady'll be a fixin' a snack." And, setting the example himself, they were soon seated in the rustic chairs which had been fashioned by the old man's own hands from the willows and alders which grew along the creek. Those same awkward, comfortable chairs were always waiting there on the shady side of the "shack". In them Berger and Virginia had sat many a moonlight evening, and cooed; in them the old man and Hardy, during the latter's convalescent days, had sat and spun many a reminiscent yarn; in them the old lady and Berger had had many an enjoyable chat; in them the

old man and Wilburn often sat and talked of corn and cotton, hogs and chickens; and in them now sat Berger and the old man to talk about a very important matter, while the old lady was "a fixin' a snack".

It seemed as though the old lady was always "a fixin' a snack". Berger seldom made a call but that he was invited to sample some of her goodies. She was either making a pie or had just cut a cake, or had some hot corn bread with new butter and fresh buttermilk. Perhaps this was why he always felt at ease in her company. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, it is said, but she was undesigning in that respect. Wilburn received the same treatment when he called, and in fact everyone who happened to come that way. The old lady was absolutely impartial, and showed her resentment if anyone refused her hospitality or accepted with reluctance.

The conversation was not destined to drag this time, nor to be confined to the topic of the weather. The old man decided to have his say out—to make a complete explanation of his position, so there could be no misunderstanding.

"As I was a sayin', I ain't got nuthin' agin yuh personal. Yuh know women shuah are queeah. They love a lot o' fuss an' feathers an' shiny fandangles. That's what attracts 'em. Now yuh take a soldier in his uniform or one o' them thah Wild West moving pictuh actohs, an' the women all fall in love with 'em at first sight. Now yuh jest look at yuhself. Yuh is loaded with flumadiddles from haid tuh foot, most as bad as an Indian chief. Any place there's room to stick an ornament on yuh shuah have got it. Thah's yuh hat all wound round with that thah rattlesnake skin an' string o' rattlers. Then that thah leather collah stuck all ovah with turquoise jest about like an Indian would have it; an' that silk handkerchief, big enough for a shawl, an' all colors, not to mention them thah white spots the size o' half dollahs.

"Yes, that's what takes the eye of a female suah enough. An' then those thah big leather cuffs comin' well-nigh tuh

yuh elbows, all fandangled up with silver an' turquoise. Navajo work shuah enough same as yuh collah; and yuh chaps, and spuh, and bridle bits and chain, and saddle, and everything is the same way. Thah's silvah enough in that thah saddle tuh found a National bank." (Hardy had just that morning given Berger the silver mounted saddle, jokingly remarking that it was to be his wedding present.)

Berger had sat listening and gradually cooling off, wondering where the old man's remarks were leading to. He was now beginning to see the humorous side of the situation, so he ventured to ask:

"Now, Dad, don't you admire that saddle just a bit yourself?"

The old man glanced into Berger's eyes and saw there nothing that indicated anything but good nature and merriment. The question in itself was not so irrelevant as Berger's manner. This was the very first time he had ever addressed Mr. Ashton as "Dad". The members of Dad's family called him nothing else, but Berger had always politely addressed him as Mr. Ashton. There had been, perhaps, a slight accent on the "Dad" too, which may have attracted the old man's attention.

Was Berger jestingly implying that he was already a member of the family? Why this familiarity of words, tone, and manner? Was he laughing at the serious remarks just made? Was Berger's sudden change of manner impertinence? These were questions flashing through the old man's mind as he read the humor in Berger's eyes. True Southerner as he was, he was quick to resent an insult, implied or otherwise. Never before had Berger ventured to jest with Mr. Ashton. His conversations had been "aye" and "nay", especially of late, for in fact, no further conversation had been invited. So this time it was the old man who demanded an explanation.

"Why, suh, do yuh call me 'Dad'? Only membahs of my family evah call me that."

"Pardon me, Mr. Ashton, but you know I have heard

Virginia speak of you so often as 'Dad' that—well,—I really wish I could call you 'Dad'."

This time the old man saw in Berger's eyes not only humor, but seriousness, and he resented both. Springing to his feet with an oath he challenged:

"That remahk is an insult both tuh me and tuh my daughtah. Yuh all shall ansah foh it, suh."

Berger was grinning now, thoroughly enjoying the situation, but not wishing to fight. He could not, however, resist the temptation to excite the old man further, so he replied laughingly:

"Calm yourself, Mr. Ashton. You are not talking to a Mexican now, you know. Sit down and cool off a bit."

This infuriated the old man, who was swinging his fists and repeating his challenge, and with an oath rushed for Berger.

Nimble dodging him, Berger sprang to his feet, backing up to keep out of the old man's reach, guarding off his blows. Finally they came to a stop facing each other, and Berger said with sincere manner and expression:

"I apologize, Mr. Ashton. You know I meant no insult."

"Yuh all is moah no account than I thought. Yuh, suh, is a cowahd. Take yuh hoss and"—

"I will take my horse and leave. But I am no coward, Mr. Ashton. So I must first take my punishment. I do not want to fight, but I will not run." And raising his clenched fists and assuming the attitude of a pugilist, he added: "Come on, I am no coward."

The light of battle again shone in the old man's eyes as he rushed forward. He was a well preserved man of perhaps sixty-five years, and this was by no means his first fight. In short, he had been the victor in many and prided himself on his pugilistic ability. Perhaps this had had something to do with his resenting insults so readily.

Berger did not back up this time, but he did guard himself. In fact he did it so well and skillfully that the old man was unable to touch him with a telling blow. Only once did he land on his face, and that with but

little force, for his chest had bumped up against the business end of Berger's long arm extended stiff as a ramrod. Berger retaliated with a gentle slap on the cheek, open-handed. To Berger this was not to be a fight, but a sparring match. He would not hit the old man with his fist. Thanks to his training, he was able to protect himself without that.

But what might have been the outcome of the bout had it been fought to a finish will never be known. For at this moment the old lady came around the corner of the house carrying the big moulding board laden with the snack,—pumpkin pie, doughnuts, cheese and buttermilk,—enough surely to stop any fight. Seeing what was going on, she lost no time in placing the moulding board on one of the upturned blocks of wood, improvising a table as she had planned, and rushed to the fray.

When the ample form of Mrs. Ashton interposed itself in a business like manner between the combatants, confusion ensued. She was complete master of the situation, for her tongue, woman's formidable weapon, was plying on them without fear or favor. To repeat what she said would make this short story a long one, but as a culmination of the furious tongue lashing she issued a command, her manner showing conclusively that she expected it to be obeyed: "Now you two simpletons walk up and shake hands like men. You ain't got nothin' to fight about no how. If men ain't worse than animals! I have to separate my old gander and gobbler twenty times a day, and now it's you. Walk up there, I tell you, and shake hands, and then set yourselves down in them chairs an' eat that pumpkin pie, and drink a glass o' buttermilk, an' you'll fell a heap better."

Berger advanced and held out his hand. "Mr. Ashton, I again apologize. I was not respectful."

The old man with well feigned reluctance extended his, remarking with something like admiration in his tone:

"Yuh all is moah of a man than I thought yuh was."

The old lady was still a jabbering, as the men took their seats on either side of the improvised table.

"There's no way o' takin' the fight out o' a man like puttin' somethin' into his stomach. Did I put too much spice in them pies, Dad?" And, without waiting for a reply, she asked of Berger: "Why, you don't mean to tell us, Mr. Berger, that you are going to leave the country to-morrow? And ain't Mr. Hardy comin' to see us 'fore he leaves? He used to come real often. Never did come half as often as you, though. 'Spect, maybe, there was a reason too. Ha! Ha! Awful fine man, Hardy is. If I didn't already have one man to look after, I'd set my cap fer him"—

And on and on from one subject to another Mrs. Ashton's tongue continued to master the situation while the men silently ate their pie, doughnuts, and cheese, drank buttermilk, and unconsciously calmed themselves.

By the time the last of the repast had disappeared into that portion of their anatomies which most affects a man's humor, they were almost back to normal, pulses beating regularly, the little sparring match forgotten for the time being.

But the old man had not yet said all that he wished to say to Berger about the all absorbing subject which had been uppermost in his mind for weeks, and, as soon as his better half retreated with a final admonition, as she turned the corner of the house, "Now if you men start any more fussin', I'll be right out here, and I'll bring my rollin' pin next time too", he began:

"Yuh all ain't got no home fittin' fer a woman. We 'uns don't want ouah daughtah tuh be livin' in a tepee out undah a pine tree like a Indian or gypsy. We all give Virginia a betta bringin' up than that, an' yuh all ain't no kind o' man"—

Just then Hardy rode around the corner of the house, interrupting a conversation which bid fair to develop into personal differences again.

"Hello, Mr. Ashton. I reckoned I'd find Berger here. You and Berger appear to be gettin' most awful thick lately, the amount a visitin' he's doin' over here."

Hardy was amused at the idea of Berger visiting with

the old man while Virginia was out riding with Wilburn, as he had seen them in town. Before he had time to make further joshing remarks, however, Mrs. Ashton rushed out and again took charge of the situation. Hardy must put up his horse and he and Berger stay to supper.

Two hours after supper Hardy and Berger bade Mr. and Mrs. Ashton good-bye. Virginia had not yet returned from her ride. Hardy expressed his regret that he would not get to see her again and told Mrs. Ashton to say "good-bye" to her for him. But Berger did not voice his sentiments nor leave any good-bye in the custody of the old folks.

Berger did not sleep well that night. Bright and early the next morning he and Hardy bid Dick and Harry good-bye, and, with saddle and pack horses and all of their belongings, they began the ascent of the little trail leading over the mountains.

That night they camped at the very spot where Thorne and Casper had camped two years before. The campfire talk that evening was strained and limited. There was no enthusiasm expressed by either of the men regarding the new appointments that might be in store for them when they arrived at the Supervisor's office. Neither was interested in or inclined to exchange confidences as to the other's future plans, but turned rather to the pleasant reminiscences of the many happy days they had passed together.

Both realized that their ways were to part, though Hardy did not realize it was to be so soon. The next morning, when their horses were packed and saddled and they were ready to start out on their journey again, Berger reached out his hand and said, with a suggestion of tears in his eyes:

"Good-bye, Hardy. I'm not going any farther with you. Good luck."

As Hardy took his hand, he expressed no surprise. He had been wondering all of the day before at Berger's

leaving without seeing Virginia, but the subject had been too delicate for him to broach.

"I reckon I understand, kid. And good luck to you. She's worth goin' back after." And they mounted their horses, Hardy going on, and Berger turning back on the little trail toward District Number Five.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TELLTALE FOOTPRINTS

A day or two later Virginia rode up the little trail to the spring for water. This spring was under a ledge of rocks at the head of a little timbered draw a mile from the Ashton homestead. She was riding one horse and leading another with a large water bag hanging on either side of the pack saddle. Her head was bowed as though in deep thought. In spite of her naturally observant nature, she saw none of the things she was passing.

Arriving at the spring, she dismounted, took one of the water bags, and, sitting down on a boulder, began to fill it by dipping up the water with a cup. She seemed in no hurry, and, when the bag was half full, she stopped entirely and sat looking contemplatively into the spring. Then, suddenly, she dropped the cup and water bag, and, covering her face with her hands, began to sob. The tears trickled through her fingers and ran down her wrists. The sob became a cry. She cried aloud: "Oh! Why did he leave? I cannot let him go!"

Berger had established his camp in an unfrequented, almost impenetrable place, far removed from any trail. Halfway up the mountain side the overflow of a little spring had watered a small patch of ground, rendering it too damp for the growth of native timber. Nature, in her unexplainable way, had scattered the seeds, and luxurious green grass had sprung forth. On all sides was the dense forest.

Berger had sighted this patch of green from the opposite slope when riding in the roundup, ferreted his way into it, and explored it in search of cattle. There was no evidence that man had ever visited the spot before. Surely none of Ortega's cattle and sheep had found it.

So, when Berger parted with Hardy, he had this spot in mind for his new camping place. He had not wished to have his presence in the neighborhood generally known. In fact, there was only one with whom he expected to share that secret. His plans, however, had been very indefinite. Love had completely incapacitated his reasoning powers. Cupid had absolute control of the situation, and would unfold the future.

As Berger rode into the little park, this time he beheld its inhabitants. At the little spring a score of deer were watering. Instinctively he raised his rifle to his shoulder, and a bullet sped through the heart of a pretty young buck. Terror stricken, the others fled to the cover of the adjacent forest. Long had these deer abode here, unmolested except perhaps by their natural enemy of the forest,—the mountain lion. Man, the most dreaded enemy of all wild things, had never before intruded upon their domain. But now he had found them, and one of their number had fallen victim at first sight. Thus has man ever introduced himself.

Berger did not need the meat. His act had been thoughtless, but his feelings had acted when he was not in control of himself. Afterwards he felt sorry and wished he had not shot the deer; he would now have to skin it and jerk the meat.

On this particular morning Berger had ridden out from his hiding place and meandered down the mountain side, traveling by no regular trail, but studying the lay of the land and picking his way as best he could through the entanglements of the forest.

He had seen Virginia leave the house and hurried to meet her at the spring. He was determined that he would know her mind. If refusal it must be, he would hear it from her own lips. He had pondered long on Mr. Ashton's remarks, and had come to the conclusion that perhaps after all Virginia had been compelled to accept Wilburn's attentions. Mr. Ashton may have deliberately planned that she should not be at home that day. But

still there was doubt. For some time Virginia's manner had not been as frank as it used to be. There was something which he did not understand, something inexplicable. And he intended—

Then another side of the matter bobbed up in his mind and made his face redden with regret; he had never declared his own position—he had not asked her to marry him. How did she know his intentions? Actions may speak louder than words, but they are not always accurately interpreted. This phase of the situation he would quickly remedy. All he wanted was an opportunity to speak. No longer would he hesitate to reveal his position.

Would she listen to him? He rehearsed over and over to himself what he would say to her, just how he would approach her.

But the unexpected sight which he beheld as he drew near to the spring disrupted all of his carefully laid plans. He also overheard the cry "Oh! Why did he leave?" Fairly flinging himself from his horse, he rushed toward her, arms extended to claim his own.

Virginia had not heard the approach of the horse, but, as Berger dismounted and rushed toward her, she did hear the rustle of the heavy leather chaps and the rattle of spurs, and recognized them as familiar sounds. Springing to her feet, her surprised and wonder-filled eyes confirmed at half a glance the impressions of her ears—and more. They had seen through into the very depths of his soul.

Lightly dodging him, she escaped his embrace and, springing upon her pony, she struck the spurs deep. "You horrid thing!—To spy upon me!" she was saying at the same time back over her shoulder.

There was an expression in her voice which might have been taken for scorn. But instead it was a challenge. Was she afraid, panic stricken, or ashamed and humiliated at having her lover find her wailing her heart out for him, that she hastened to deny by act and word?

Berger wasted no time. Rushing back to his horse he

mounted and gave chase. Down the trail they ran. Virginia's pony was fast, and she had quite an advantage in the start. If Berger had reasoned, he would have known that he could not hope to overtake her before she reached the house. But he did not reason. It was instinct again,—perhaps,—but as applied to human beings instinct is too crude a term, so we shall say this time that it was Cupid who prompted him to strike his spurs deep. Poor Knight, submitting to all of this unnecessary, unreasoning punishment, put forth his best efforts, but could gain but little.

Just at the mouth of the draw another trail intersected. It was the one over which Hardy had trailed the hobble cutting caporal—the one over which they had ridden to the forest fire—the one over which Virginia and Berger had often taken long and lovely rides.

As she neared this trail, Virginia cast one glance over her shoulder and turned her pony into it. Did she so know her father's wrath that she dared not keep on down the trail toward the house, fearing that he would shoot Berger on sight? Or was this still a further challenge? If the former, she then and there made her decision between them. If the latter, she was putting Berger to a final test—compelling him to express himself.

Thus began a wild chase through the forest. The horses and riders were well matched. It would be an endurance race over that narrow, rocky, mountainous trail,—too perilous to be conceived by normal minds. But love is blind, it is said, and its course is seldom smooth.

No one knows how the race terminated, nor just what happened. There were no witnesses, and neither of the participants has given out any details. It is known, however, that just after dark that evening they dismounted at the spring, hurriedly filled the water bags, and slung them upon the pack horse, which had fortunately become entangled in his rope and been obliged to wait.

And just as their arms encircled each other and their lips met in the sublime realization of a perfect and bliss-

ful understanding, a wise old owl perched on a nearby limb, roused himself from his day dream, and winked one eye long and knowingly at the moon, which had peeked over the horizon, spying on the scene and displaying a most humorous expression on its rotund old countenance.

"For goodness sake, child! Where have you been all day? Most worried my head off. Give me some of that water, quick; everything's bilin' dry. I just put the last drop I had on them string beans. Your Dad and Mr. Wilburn will be here presently a lookin' for their supper. Can't imagine what's keepin' 'em so long. Mr. Wilburn came over this afternoon to take you a ridin'; but seein' you weren't here, he and Dad started out to ride around amongst the neighbors to talk up that ditch business. But they'll be back right soon.

"Expect 'em jest any minute. Hand me that sassafras. Mr. Wilburn loves sassafras tea. There, now go and change your dress, quick, child. And wash your face an' give it a good rubbin'. You might put on jest a speck o' powder, too. It's awfully streaked up, and your eyes are all red and rubbed lookin'. . . . Oh! You can't hide it from your old Ma, child! You ain't been lost nor nothin' in the woods. Nothing like that. You jest been up there a poutin' and cryin' over that good fuh nothin' ranger, who didn't care no more about you than to run off without sayin' good-bye.

"Dad said jest this mornin' that that proved to him that he'd sized him up right. He said that, if his intentions had a been honorable, he wouldn't a been scared off so easy. Dad said he'd expected to have to 'shoot the skunk'. I must say, though, that I was deceived. I always admired Mr. Berger an' thought he was a right nice man; an' I did think he loved you, too. But Dad was right. He said right along that he wasn't no count. So now you might jest as well forget him first as last, dearie. Here, this water is gettin' hot now. Use that first an' then cold, an' 'hurry up.

"Your hair is jest a mess. You've got to take it down,

and give it a good combin'. Now, there—I hear them drivin' up right now. Run into the bedroom, quick, honey, and don't come out till you've made a change in your appearance. Better put on that new gingham dress—I jest finished it to-day—an jest a speck o' powder. You'll—

"Come right in, Mr. Wilburn. Supper is almost ready. Jest steepin' the sassafras tea. Made it on your account, too, 'cause I knowed you loved it so. Been right warm this evenin', ain't it. Here's warm water and there's the soap and towel. Make yourself right at home.

"Dad, you go right out an' split me an armful o' wood. I've been burnin' chips all day.

"Dad's always goin' off and leavin' me without wood or nothin'. Don't need any wood now,—supper's ready; but I made up my mind that he would get me some wood the first thing he done when he got home afore he got a mouthful to eat. The only way I can get him to do anything is to starve him to it.

"You needn't bother to get much, Dad. Jest come along with what you've got. Supper's gettin' cold; hurry up.

"Take that rockin' chair an' sit down a bit, Mr. Wilburn. Virginia will be out in a minute. She's jest changin' her dress. Goodness how that gal worries me! She done went up in the woods an' got lost an' been wanderin' around all day. Jest luck that she found the way back. She's all worn out, poor child. Did you have any luck talkin' up the ditch business? Goodness knows, I shore hope they do get that ditch. I'm gettin' tired o' bein' without water more'n half the time. Dad never will get that well dug—an' the garden's all dryin' up.—Jackson's opposed it, you say? Jest what I expected. You can't make nothin' out o' a cowpuncher. Them folks'll never know nothin' but to trail an old cow around—worse'n Mexicans. Mexicans do try to raise some beans an' corn. That's more'n a cowpuncher does. But goodness knows how they do it; they're too lazy to hoe. They don't know how to farm nohow.

"Here's Virginia now.

"Sit right up, Mr. Wilburn. Take that chair by the open window. It's hotter'n blazes in this shack. Wonder if Dad will ever get around to build another room so's we can live like white folks an' eat in the dinin' room.

"We'll have to wait fer Dad, as usual. He's always behind time, but he'll get here in time to get his share; don't worry about him. Have some o' the fried chicken, Mr. Wilburn. It's the first o' the season. I didn't get any hens set last spring till way late. Don't expect I got it half fried. It's shore aggravatin' to get up a meal without wood or water or nothin'. I'd like to have everything I wanted handy jest once to see if I could cook one meal right. But, goodness me! that'll never be. Help yourself to them biscuits an' gravy. Do you like cucumbers? Maybe you'd rather have corn bread than the biscuits. Goodness how I talk! Jest as if you'd have to take your choice.

"Virginia, pass them new potatoes an' string beans. Won't you have a glass o' milk, Mr. Wilburn? That little Jersey Dad got o' you shore does give rich milk, most like cream. An' have some honey with your biscuit. It's right good fer wild honey. Dad cut the tree yesterday.

"Dad, why don't you pass the butter? Sittin' there shovelin' into your mouth as usual, never thinkin' or carin' fer nobody or nothin' except yourself."

Next morning Dad saddled a horse and started out in search of a stray steer. Coming to the little spring he searched for tracks—perhaps the steer had come in there to water. But the tracks which he saw were of an entirely different character. There in the soft dirt about the spring were the telltale footprints,—plain as a printed page,—speaking plainly of the happenings of the day before. And, as though that were not enough, there lay a braided hair quilt with silver bands and turquoise mountings.

Dad recognized it at once as Berger's. It matched his outfit,—saddle, bits, spurs, cuffs, and collar. Dismounting, he picked up the quirt and examined it carefully, wrathfully cursing its owner in the vilest terms. Then, leading his horse back into a thicket to conceal it, he drew his rifle from its scabbard and crawled along through the underbrush until he came to a hiding place commanding a view of all trails leading to the spring. There he waited.

Virginia came for water as usual, but to-day she did not tarry. Berger would not come until to-morrow. Then he would expect her to go with him,—to go out into the world to make a home together. "Should she tell her mother? Could she leave without saying good-bye?" These were questions which occupied her thoughts as she dipped the water from the spring.

At sundown Dad returned. He said nothing to Virginia, but that evening he told her mother about what he had found, and declared in no uncertain terms his intention to again lay for Berger.

That night Mrs. Ashton spent a sleepless night. Was she thinking of Dad's intention "to get" Berger? No. She was thinking of her daughter's happiness, of her future.

But why retell the old, old story of a mother's love,—of the rending of heartstrings, as she realized that the time had come when she must give up her dearest possession—her child who had chosen a mate.

Chosen a mate? Well, perhaps, but the assertion has been made that Cupid had complete control—and so he had. Mother's feelings or Dad's wrath had not been considered.

The next morning Dad saddled his horse and, taking his rifle, started for the ranger's camp.

Three days later Mr. and Mrs. Berger rode up to a little railroad station. They had ridden out by way of Brewster's and had been married by the new minister in the white settlement near there. Brewster and the min-

ister's wife had "stood up" with them during the ceremony.

Berger unpacked and unsaddled the tired horses and turned them loose, free to return to their home range. Going into the little station for a few minutes, he came out with the information, "There is a train going West at six thirty and one going East at eight fifteen. Which shall we take, dear?"

Virginia hesitated only a moment. "It would be more romantic to go West, wouldn't it?"

There was no one about the station platform at that time of day, and it might not have made any difference had there been. Berger picked her up as he would a big doll, the more conveniently to express himself. Her arms encircled his neck in a regular old-fashioned bear hug of joy, as their lips came together. Then, holding her off almost at arms' length, he surveyed her, gradually letting her down till her tiptoes touched the platform. "Just wait till we get to the city! I'm a going to see what my doll looks like in doll clothes!"

They sat down on the bench to wait for the train. Virginia's eyes traveled back up the trail over which they had come. "Dad can't catch us now, can he?"

"He hasn't had a chance, dear, since we waded down the Rio del Torro. It would take him too long to pick up the trail there."

"I don't see why he was so mad. Mama told me all about it that morning when I left, you know."

"All about what, dear?"

"Why, about the way she and Dad ran away to get married. You know Mama was a Northern nurse and Dad a prisoner, and she nursed him. And after the war he came to marry her, and they had to run away, 'cause her father hated a Southerner so, you know. And she has never been back either. Mama cried so, and said she guessed Dad had forgotten all about that. Poor Mama!"

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER-DINNER REMINISCENCES

So it came to pass, in the course of human events, that Harry and Dick were left to themselves, lords over all they surveyed, representing Uncle Sam's authority there in that vast wilderness.

Their first night alone in camp recalled all the wild, bloodcurdling tales of the rangers. They sat about the camp fire late into the night, talking them over and trying to convince themselves that it must all be fiction. But the only conclusion they could arrive at was that underneath all the peculiar verbosity of the rangers' tales, there was substantial foundation of fact. They realized that they were in an environment not only new and strange to them, but full of dangers too real to be ignored.

When they finally went to bed, they could not sleep, though they took the precautions taught them about encircling their camp with a hair rope. The security which they had been enjoying in the company of the old rangers had left them; self-reliance had not replaced it.

The next morning, after an unappetizing breakfast, they decided to ride to the post-office for the mail. Ortega was not there, and they were glad of the fact. The Mexicans whom they met did not show the respect, fear, and admiration with which they had been impressed when accompanied by Hardy. They could talk with no one, and felt that they were objects of derision. Some of the Mexicans grinned in their faces. No one openly interfered with them or molested them in any way, but they hurried back to camp with their mail. The letters made them even more homesick. They were no longer enjoying their picnic.

Another unpleasant night was spent in camp with little sleep and very little conversation. The next morning

Dick tried to make biscuits, but, when mixing the dough, it persisted in sticking all over his hands, and, when he finally put it into the Dutch oven, it burned on the bottom and was raw on top. This may have had nothing to do with Harry's question, but there were many things to prompt it.

"Is it worth it, Dick?"

"Worth what?" Dick replied, trying to convey the idea that he did not know what Harry was referring to, although the same question had been revolving in his own mind the greater part of the night.

"You know. We don't have to stay out here in this wilderness, do we? Doesn't our training entitle us to something better? Do you think Professor Sargent realized what kind of a position he was securing for us? Or would he expect us to waste our time or lives here?"

Dick laughed. "'Time or lives' is literally right, Harry, though it is comical the way you said it. I will confess that I had already come to the same conclusion,—that this is not the kind of a position we are looking for,—and I was going to propose to you that we 'hit the trail', as the rangers say. With the influence we have, we can land something better; you know that."

A few days later the new rangers found their way back to Old Mack's office to tender their resignations. Their appearance was somewhat different from when they had started out a few weeks before; but to Mack they looked more like forestry men. Their faces were sunburned, and it was easy to see that their experiences had done them no harm.

Their resignations were not accepted, however. Old Mack wished to retain them on his force,—not on District Number Five, but in a capacity suited to their qualifications; for there were many positions on the Forest requiring men of technical training. And it might be of interest to know that some years later Dick became Supervisor of one of the largest Forests in the Southwest. When recalling to mind his first initiation into the work on

District Number Five, he always has to laugh at the experiences which he and Harry went through during those first weeks.

But to return to Old Mack and his problems. During the time he had been trying out the unknown men recommended by his superiors, he had been turning over in his mind plans to care for the situation on District Number Five. He had learned from Hardy that Ortega had taken down his fence and was giving no further trouble. When Harry and Dick came in, he decided it was time that he made good his part of the agreement. This time he would send men of his own choosing.

So, as the first autumn frosts again tinted the foliage of the forest, two more rangers might again have been seen wending their lonely way over the mountains. Wending their lonely way is correct; for they did not travel together, nor at exactly the same time. Old Mack had decided that there was no longer any necessity for two men to travel together for protection. They could cover more country separately, and thenceforth the duties of the rangers in Ortega's country would be different. He had decided to divide the territory into two separate districts, so the rangers would no longer be stationed together.

Ranger Card was sent by way of Hamilton's place, and some ten days later Ranger Gilson came through by Brewster's. Of course they heard all the wild tales about the happenings on District Number Five. Not only Hamilton, but everyone else on both sides of the mountains was now well versed in these narratives, and, as would be expected, they had not lost any of the "wild and woolly" in the retelling as they had passed from mouth to mouth.

It must be confessed that the weird, wild tales to which Card and Gilson were obliged to listen did not serve to set them at their ease, but rather to place them on their guard. Well did they know the ways of the West. Then, too, they had their orders to carry out. Old Mack had said: "Make peace and keep it, *but enforce the regu-*

lations." Whatever impressions these tales may have made upon them, they did not turn back, nor did they delay their journey. They were officers so used to carrying out orders that it had become a habit with them.

Old Mack had promised Card that some ranger stations would be built as soon as possible, so Card made his home temporarily with one of the white families, not wishing to bring his own family into the country until he had a house in which they could live.

Using this home as headquarters, he worked the Forest in all directions from there, going for his mail about once a week. Though born and educated in the East, he had spent all of his mature years—and some that were not so mature—on the frontiers of the West, ever drifting on to where the country was the newest, keeping "out on the edge of things," as he tersely put it, turning his hand to whatever occupation presented itself, which just at that time was that of a forest ranger. To him this little excursion held forth promise of exploration,—a thing which he always enjoyed.

The Mexicans had, of course, heard of the rangers who had started to come across and had turned back, frightened by Hamilton's tales. Dick and Harry had been quite accurately sized up during their short incumbency in the District. And, true to their nature, the Mexicans felt they must satisfy their curiosity by trying out the new rangers to see if they, too, were tenderfeet. These rangers appeared different from any of the old rangers, being friendly to all whom they met, and displaying no officious and haughty airs. Still, there was something about them which caused the Mexicans to hesitate.

Curiosity finally prevailed, and one morning, as Card was riding along toward the post-office, a Mexican set the dogs on him, presumably to test his marksmanship and have a little fun with him. Card did not know that the dogs were being set on him purposely; but, as he thought a great deal of his horses and was riding a special

pet, he was much annoyed when the dogs threatened to fasten their teeth in the horse's flesh.

He disliked provoking any disturbance or ill feeling, because he had his instructions to keep peace. At the same time, he could not bear to see his horse bitten by the dogs; and, from some of the stories he had heard of the way the Mexicans treated the rangers, he felt that the better part of valor might be discretion, so instead of shooting at the dogs he shot straight into the air. This served its purpose of scaring the dogs away, but greatly amused the Mexicans, convincing them that Card was a tenderfoot.

The next week as he came down the road, which he had to travel in going to the post-office, unless he made a long detour, his horse had trotted some distance past the house, when he heard the Mexicans open the door and set the dogs on him. It seemed as though everyone in the little settlement came out to witness the affair. This time when the dogs came up, Card did not shoot into the air, but pulled his gun down on the foremost dog and shot him between the eyes. Replacing the gun in its scabbard, he rode on down the road without looking back, his horse never even changing its gait.

Card was fond of his horses, and this particular one he loved. New Mexico and Arizona have good horses; Colorado, perhaps, has better; and Wyoming, the best, so they say. This was one of the best. That little brand, nestled so snugly under the cheek piece of the bridle, was guarantee enough of that in the neighborhood where he was raised. Card had bought him and brought him with him when he came into the country; or, rather, the horse had brought him. It had been a long journey over range after range of the Rockies. Horse and man had become close friends, and had since become inseparable.

It was not strange then that this mild mannered man should protect his favorite horse from dog bites, even at the risk of exciting the enmity of the people with whom his orders were to keep peace. But little did he realize how soon he would again have his horse and his honor to

defend. It had not occurred to him that an exact counterpart of that little brand might be recorded in the Territory under the name of an entirely different ownership. Nor did he realize that the mere possession of his favorite horse might imply that he was a horse thief simply because of that little brand, and that the custom of the country in regard to horse thieves would be promptly carried out. However, such was the case.

Two days previously, Deputy Sheriff Tom Cady had sat at one of the tables in the "Wild Horse" saloon idly sipping a glass of beer and playing a game of solitaire, whiling away the time. Presently the rattle of spurs and the rustle of chaps announced the entrance of Jack Gordon.

"Why, hello, Tom! What ye doin' here? In ter meet Old Ortega, I suspect? How be ye, no how?"

Extending his hand, though not taking the trouble to arise, Tom replied: "Yes; the old devil is coming in on the night train. Sit down and have a drink."

"Don't care if I do. How is Old Ortega, no how? Heard he was havin' right smart trouble with them ranger fellers."

"Oh, he's given in to 'em. Eats out o' their hands. Right disgustin' to me. I'm a lookin' for another location, Jack. Anything out your way?"

"Why, I suspect the old man could take ye on bronc bustin'. That's yer line, ain't it, Tom?"

"Well—yes; but scoutin' is what I kindo' lean to."

Jack gave Tom a scrutinizing look, while he mentally digested this statement, before replying: "Ye've got a good job with Old Ortega, Tom. An' ye're just foolin' yerself if ye think he's goin' ter give in ter them ranger fellers. He'll have them a eatin' out o' his hand, the first thing you know. Old Ortega ain't no fool, nor tenderfoot either. That whiskey is right appetizing. . . . Bartender, jest trot out a quart o' Old Crow an' set it

here a twixt us. It'll save ye travel, right smart. Ha! Ha!"

Tom laid a five dollar bill on the table. "I'm paying for it, Jack."

"Naw, go on; money is easy with me, Tom. The old man's right liberal."

"Play ye a game of 'seven up' to settle the dispute," parried Tom.

"All right, shuffle 'em up. It's yer deal."

As Tom leisurely dealt the cards he asked: "Your outfit brands bar diamond on the right cheek or jaw, don't it, Jack?"

"Yep, on the right jaw. Been running across anything o' that kind?"

"Yes, I have. One o' them rangers is a ridin' a horse with that brand. Bridle about covers it. But I got a chance to examine it one day when he had him a standin' out in front o' the post-office, and it's sure there."

"We ain't been a losin' none, Tom. But the old man never sells one without vendin' the brand, and if the horse is a wearin' that brand, he's ours. What kind o' hoss is he?"

"Rangy, white faced sorrel; best put up saddle animal I've seen in a long time," answered Tom.

"Ours don't run that color, Tom; but he might a painted him. Ha! ha!"

They both laughed at this intended wit, and as the cards were dealt and re-dealt, and the bottle emptied and replaced, the conversation rambled on.

It was not a busy day at the "Wild Horse", and the few customers who came and went paid little attention to the pair who were so busily engaged playing, drinking, and talking. Toward evening Tom, chancing to look up, noticed a stylishly dressed young man coming in the door. Leaning back in his chair, he laughed uproariously. Something about the young man evidently appeared too comical for him to pass without special and appropriate comment:

"Hey, Mr. Dude! Just come right over here an'

gurglesome o' this delicious 'Old Crow'. It'll make whiskers on ye'r chin'—hic—eh? Ha! ha!—hic."

But to Jack there was nothing ridiculous or comical about the stylish young man, and he hastened to explain:

"Why, Tom, this is an old friend o' mine. Use ter go to school with me. He drinks more whiskey in a day than ye can in a month—and carries it; that's what I mean. He's 'printer's devil' over here on the *Dispatch*. Jest tell him anything ye want ter get inter print. . . . Mr. Jewett, meet Deputy Sheriff Tom Cady."

Tom arose and advanced with an apologetic air. "Well, well, glad to meet you, Mr. Jewett," and turning to Jack added: "Pardon me, Jack—hic—fer actin' a bit rough. Let's all have a social drink." And, leading the way, they all sauntered to the bar.

A few drinks, and a few more, and they had confided their plans to the printer's devil—just how, where, and when Deputy Sheriff Cady would apprehend this tender-foot ranger horse thief, and also the possibility, almost certainty, that a mob would get hold of the prisoner and hang him.

Excusing himself politely, Mr. Jewett slipped out. As he walked down the street, he hurriedly penciled on his pad: "Forest Ranger Hanged As Horse Thief. Thought to be desperado long sought by Mounted Police. Run down and arrested by Deputy-Sheriff Tom Cady. Officer overpowered by angry mob."

Half aloud he thought: "I'll have to wait for confirmation. But Tom will pull it off all right if he sobers up. About day after to-morrow's issue will catch it."

Jack and Tom took supper at the "Chink's Joint", after which Jack suggested: "Let's go over and have another round o' drinks, Tom."

"Nuthin' doin, Jack. 'Nuff's a nuff. Let's walk over to the justice's house an' swear out that warrant."

Jack agreed. They found the justice was out of town and would not be back for several days, and it was finally decided that a warrant was unnecessary—a thing which could be secured afterward if need be. But to

Tom's official mind there should be some pretense at serving "papers". Therefore, it was decided that Jack should write a letter ordering the ranger to deliver the horse to Deputy Sheriff Tom Cady. Accordingly they called on their printer's devil friend to "execute the article".

Jewett was only too glad to be of service in so important a matter. This second conference with Deputy Sheriff Tom Cady—minion of the law—would furnish details, and sufficient confirmation in advance, as to the whole affair. His paper would flash the news almost simultaneously with the arrest—or the hanging.

The next day Cady drove Ortega home. Their conversation was very limited. In fact, ever since Cady had failed to "get" Brewster, it had been impossible for them to converse. There had been a time when Cady was proud to sit beside the great and powerful Ortega, and act as his bodyguard. Then he had been envied, admired, feared by everyone whom they met,—friend or enemy. Then it had been an honor. Then, too, Ortega had taken pride in his escort, with whom he entrusted his life. But now it was not so.

Needless to say, Cady did not tell him of his plans for the morrow. There was deep down in his heart a desire that he might yet regain favor in the eyes of his former lord. If his plans were successful, he would. He did not drink heavily that day, resorting to his pocket flask only to steady his somewhat shattered nerves. He was sobering up for the work of the morrow.

Early the next morning he was up. Saddling his best horse, he scouted the neighborhood, quietly organizing a posse of henchmen. They were to meet at the post-office and await the arrival of the ranger, who would surely come for his mail that day.

As always, there was one among the faithful posse who, in order to gain special favor with his master, the Mayor Domo, had hastened to him to tell what was about to take place. Ortega listened attentively. Then he slowly lighted a cigar, and, holding the burning match significantly in

his fingers, pronounced the name "Tom Cady" and blew it out. Without further comment the messenger was dismissed.

So, as Card rode up to the post-office after killing the dog, and dropped the reins, he was all unaware of the elaborate preparations for his reception. He noticed the crowd of Mexicans, and also Tom Cady lounging on a counter, but suspected nothing. In his usual, friendly manner, he saluted: "Good morning, gentlemen; Buenos dias, amigos," and passed on to the post-office window for his mail.

Noticing a letter bearing the post mark of the County Seat, his curiosity prompted him to open it at once. It read:

"MR. FOREST RANGER,

Honorable Horse Thief:

You are hereby commanded to deliver at once to Deputy Sheriff Tom Cady that bar diamond horse. You won't have any further use for him if they put you where you belong. Enclosed is a certificate of our brand. We always vend it when we sell. When we don't, they are stolen. See?

Here's luck to you,

JACK GORDON,

Foreman Gordon Horse and Cattle Co."

As Card read the solemn command to deliver the horse to Cady and scanned the certificate of brand enclosed, the accusation of being a horse thief flashed through his mind with real significance. The posse of Mexicans and the Deputy Sheriff's presence instantly explained themselves. The coils of rope in the store, the stately cottonwood trees in front—everything combined to flash a vision before his mind. He was frightened.

As he looked up, Cady leisurely advanced, and with

leering grin and most sarcastic manner, inquired: "What you a goin' to do about it, feller?"

Card was almost too frightened to speak. The question, "Would he submit to arrest, or what?" flashed through his mind for the hundredth time within the instant. Then, as he noted the triumphant gleam in Cady's eyes and brutal expression of countenance, indignation and resentment mingled with his fright. His decision had been made. He replied in an even, steady tone:

"I am not going to do anything about it. What are you going to do?"

Cady might easily have covered Card when he was reading the letter, but he had not thought it necessary. In fact, the old time popular code among Western sheriffs who prided themselves on being quick "on the draw" forbade such a move. Now he would have a chance to display his skill. He was pleased. Instantly came his answer: "I am goin' to take the horse—and *you*."

The "you" was pronounced in a hiss, as he crouched—his guns hung low.

At this instant the office door flew open at Cady's elbow, and Ortega burst forth. "Stop! Stop!" he shouted, as he thrust himself squarely in front of Cady.

Cady relaxed. Settling back against the counter, he assumed an attitude of sullen obedience and indifference. Ortega addressed him in a mild, though positive tone: "Tom, I want to see you in the office!"

Cady turned toward the door. Years of habitual obedience to his master's commands allowed no hesitation. Ortega, quietly ignoring all, followed him into the office and closed the door.

"Tom, you have been a good man," began Ortega.

Cady jumped with surprise, but made no reply. Ortega passed him a cigar as he continued: "I saved your life to-day, Tom."

"Like hell, you did! I was just a givin' him his chance," retorted Cady.

Ortega puffed his cigar, and blew a smoke ring. "I saw it all," resumed Ortega. "The ranger had no in-

tention of pulling his gun first. But he had his eyes riveted on that badge just over your heart, and wouldn't have missed it a fraction of an inch. *You* might have missed. Your nerves are not what they once were. You drink too much."

"That's my business! If I get plugged, that's some more of it! I don't shoot a man in the back. You know that—"

Ortega interrupted: "That's your failing, Tom. When a man needs killing, he needs killing. You have rid this country of many a bad man in your time. But that time is past."

Ortega was now on his feet pacing the floor as he so often did when in serious discussion or thought. Finally he went to the desk and drew forth a roll of bills, and handing them to Cady said: "You are no longer needed here."

Cady's mind was in a quandary. His expression was an interrogation. Ortega answered this with the question: "Does that square us, Tom?"

Cady answered simply: "It does." The large denomination of some of the bills had stunned him. Removing his star from his breast, he handed it to Ortega, and, after shaking hands, took his hat and left the room.

The news regarding Card's defiance of Cady and of his shooting the dog in such a matter-of-course way spread through the community like wild fire, sealing his popularity among the common people for all time.

Card had his interview with Old Ortega, and Ortega remained true to his promises. He was obedient after having once been subdued. He had only to be told of Mack's wishes, and he offered immediate compliance.

Gilson was a man of varied experiences and a good mixer. He could be popular in high society, or among the cowboys on the range, spoke Mexican fairly well and understood human nature. He was a natural diplomat. When he made his first visit to meet Ortega, he wore his gun as instructed by Old Mack, but had it concealed in

a little leather scabbard under his arm in his shirt bosom. He not only treated Ortega in a gentlemanly manner, but flattered him also and was soon considered by Ortega to be a very warm friend.

One day while in the post-office for the mail, he dropped in to pay his respects to Ortega, and was invited to dine with him. This was an honor that had not been extended to any of the rangers before him, and of course he very gladly accepted.

When shown into the dining room, he found it very nicely furnished in American style. Ortega and he ate alone, served by two or three different señoritas, all charming appearing young ladies, and, as the meal progressed, they became reminiscent in their conversation, confiding to each other incidents in their past lives.

Gilson told of his experiences in the East as a member of a detective agency in Philadelphia, and also of his first experiences in the West, where he had spent the last few years. As he told of his own life, he very cleverly led the conversation to that of Ortega's, and finally Ortega narrated his life story in detail.

"On my father's side I can trace my ancestry back to the noblemen of Spain. On my mother's side it can be traced to the leading Inca families of Old Mexico. Before and at the time of the Mexican War my father was very wealthy, controlling much land and large estates, surrounding the very place where I am now living. My father was a leader in the revolt against the tyranny of the various and ever changing Mexican rulers. He was always a champion of the rights of the common people and fought valiantly for them; and he was rewarded by a large following which was loyal up to the very time of his death, which occurred through the treachery of a rival would-be leader, who organized a mob, took him unawares, and hanged him on the false charge of his being a horse thief.

"This rival's name was Pablo Martinez, and his sons are now working in my sheep camps. But I am getting ahead of my story. No doubt I would have been hanged

at the same time as my father, if I had not seized a horse and made by escape. Several close subordinates of my father's were being hanged. There was a large crowd present, wild with excitement and liquor. As it was evening, and I was only a lad about twelve years old, I escaped their notice and managed to slip away quietly in the darkness.

"After the death of my father and his principal followers, it was not difficult for Pablo Martinez to obtain control over my father's people; and he took, as the victor's spoils, all of my father's horses, cattle, and sheep, and all that he owned, including even my mother and sisters. All of my remaining relatives were made peons.

"I could only imagine what he had done except for the hanging of my father, but, knowing the customs of the country as I did, even though I was only a boy, I felt certain in my own mind that what I imagined was true, as it later proved to be.

"I rode hard all night and the next day until my horse gave out. Then I hid in the mountains and rested. Later I rode on, finally arriving on the other side of the mountains, where I applied for food and shelter at a white man's house. I could not speak a word of English, but it was not difficult for me to make them understand what I wanted; my appearance told plainly enough without the use of words. I was made welcome, and stayed there a few days. Then I went on.

"I shall not attempt to tell you in detail about my wanderings, but three or four years later I enlisted in the United States Army and served under General Crook in the Indian Wars, which were then more or less common. In that way I learned merchandising in the Commissary Department at various posts and forts throughout the Southwest. I also learned a great deal about the ways of the white man, as well as those of my own people and the Indians, and became proficient in both English and Spanish.

"But all of the time my mind dwelt on the plight of my relatives, my mother and sisters, and the lost station

of my family. There is royal blood in my veins on both sides of the house. I was born to rule. I had advanced in the army to the rank of a sergeant, and was in line for further advancement. I had been frugal and had saved some money. But I decided that it was my duty to go back and give my life, if need be, in an effort to retrieve the lost station of the family and their possessions.

"Therefore, when my term of enlistment was ended, I accepted an honorable discharge, and, disguised as a sheep herder carrying all of his earthly possessions on the backs of a couple of burros, I went back into the country which had belonged to my family and secured a job herding sheep. Not even my sisters or near relatives knew me, as I had grown to manhood.

"From time to time, as the occasion arose, I made my identity known to my relatives and friends whom I could trust; and just one year after the time I arrived I had an organization formed. In fact, I had advanced from the position of a common herder to that of a caporal in the service of Pablo Martinez, and had charge of a large part of his men and flocks of sheep, which I knew in reality belonged to me and the other heirs.

"Under these circumstances it was not difficult for me to plan and execute the overthrow of Pablo Martinez and his men; and we showed no mercy, as he had shown none. We finally regained our possessions and reduced Pablo's relatives to a state of peonage as he had ours. For some time after that there were uprisings to dispute my supremacy, and many a bitter fight was fought. Since then I have always fought all intruders menacing the life and property of my family and of the people who have been loyal to us.

"Some people have accused me of murder, but this I have not been guilty of, except in the sense of a soldier who kills his enemy in time of war. In order to protect the property of myself and friends—the lands upon which we live and graze our stock—I have often been obliged to wage war on all sides. Sometimes it has been Indians who were encroaching, sometimes a rival among the

Mexican people, and at times white men,—large cattle companies.

"After taking over this part of the country from Old Mexico, the United States withdrew most of the soldiers; and, if any protection was afforded us here other than what had been furnished under the former riotous rule of Old Mexico, I was unaware of it. It was up to me to protect myself and my people as best I could, or someone else would take possession.

"True, a territorial government was organized, but its character depended upon the patrons who controlled the vote of the territory. The only way I could get the protection of this territorial government was by making shrewd bargains with the votes which I controlled,—as my people were loyal and cast their votes as I wished. Of course the title to the lands still rested in the United States. Under the slow and cumbrous machinery of the homestead law very little of it was patented. And the territorial government could not be expected even to police the vast domain from which it received no revenue.

"Men like myself, who came from Spanish families and had a higher intelligence and knowledge of affairs, natural rulers by heredity, took the situation in hand and taught the common Mexicans and Indians the ways of thrift and industry. In the winter a day school was conducted at the main placeta for the education of the boys and girls. We put the old folks to herding sheep, goats, and cattle, tilling the soil and raising crops of corn, frijoles, and wheat. In short, we converted the hordes of savage marauders and plundering bands into producers, and supplied commodities to the markets of the country, contributing to its wealth and sustenance, and at the same time keeping order here."

Ortega had tried to show Gilson that he and the other patrons were not really bandits who had been running the affairs of the territory simply for their own gain, but that they had taken charge because no one else could keep peace and order. In reality, the patrons had filled a much needed place before Uncle Sam had taken charge, and the

methods that they had employed had been necessary under the conditions which confronted them.

And, as Gilson rode home that afternoon and pondered in his mind the things that Ortega had told him, he came to realize that Ortega was a product of his ancestry and environment, and that he had tried to render a real service, although he had done it oftentimes in a gruesome way.

And, as he thought over those things, he came to realize that Ortega was a remarkable man, since he had risen from a refugee to champion what he believed to be the rights of his people, and had made his power felt in Territorial and National affairs.

So the new rangers found that Mack had been right when he had decided that the old rangers had served their purpose, and that it was time for a new line of tactics. But Ranger District Number Five was still young. New families of white people continued to come in, and Gilson and Card devoted a large part of their time to surveying the lands, and in making out the necessary papers for the applications for homesteads and other privileges in the Forest. Trees had to be picked out and marked for the newcomers to cut and use in building their new log houses.

One of the men decided to establish a sawmill, and his application for the purchase of timber had to be filed. In fact, all of the regulations regarding the uses of the forests were now being fully enforced.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REUNION

Again the autumn frosts had colored the forests in a wondrous display of beauty. Again the squirrels were gathering their hoards of nuts for winter use. Again the cattle and sheep were wending their way down through the mountain valleys. Nature had not changed.

Along the scenic highway through one of the high mountain passes came a touring car. Swiftly it passed along through the thick spruce timber, emerging into a mountain park, from which its occupants caught glimpses of the surrounding peaks, towering above timber line, and already capped with snow.

The auto road did not follow the stream down through the gorge, as had the trail which Thorne and Casper had traveled some fourteen years before, but followed a grade along the side of the cañon overlooking the gorge below. Cautiously the car crept around the curves overlooking the precipices and finally came to a stop. The driver had instinctively stopped to admire the wonderful beauty, as nearly everyone did who drove over that road.

Just before them the cañon widened, and the panorama which lay before them was one of God's masterpieces, defying man's feeble powers of description by pen or brush. Looking ahead, the horizon was the straight line of the plain meeting the sky, where the range of vision ended. On either side were the forest covered mountain ranges, spreading out and tapering irregularly to meet the plain in the rough and tumble of the foothills, their color ever changing and blending through many varied hues, with the play of the breeze and the rays of the setting sun on the foliage of the forest.

The peaks above timber line shone white with the snows which had so recently fallen. Then came the dark

green Englemann spruce and Douglas fir speckled with golden patches of aspen. Farther down came the yellow pine and the browns and reds of the scrub oak, intermingled with varying shades of color in the underbrush. Still farther down was the green piñon, then the gray of the cedar and the sage. And in the valleys below were the checker board patches of cultivated fields;—oats, corn, alfalfa, and meadow lands. Standing out in bold relief against many of these colors were the gray walls of granite.

To the right was the seemingly bottomless gorge,—the place where the cañon boxed. The echo of the waters of the little stream tumbling over the rocks a thousand feet below grew in violence as it worked its way up to the ears of the spellbound occupants of the car. On either side the same granite walls towered above them almost perpendicularly to a dizzy height. Nature had left a causeway in the form of a ledge which man had appropriated for a road, and it was at this point that the auto had stopped.

In the valley below were the same old Mexican placetas which Thorne and Casper and Hardy and Berger had passed when riding down this valley so many years before. But there were now also many small ranches with modern buildings and surroundings, fenced and cultivated fields. In fact, in every spot where the valley widened sufficiently for a home site there was an occupant.

About halfway down the valley could be seen the smoke from a sawmill, and out on the plain beyond the mouth of the valley there appeared to be a modern village. A short distance to the left of this new village Berger thought that he could discern the outline of the old placeta where the "Mayor Domo" used to live. There had surely been some great changes in the country.

Mrs. Berger had been exclaiming her delight and admiration of the view, but her husband had been too spellbound to speak. Finally Berger came to himself, and the first words uttered by him were: "I believe that

is Hardy's place right down there in that second opening in the valley. Won't he be surprised to see us though!"

Then, as though suddenly becoming anxious to reach their destination and renew old friendships, he started the big car down the winding road and an hour later stopped in front of the ranch house.

At the sound of the horn Hardy appeared in the doorway, spectacles on and newspaper in hand. Pushing back the spectacles, he stood with that serious puzzled expression on his face. It was not strange that he did not at once recognize Berger, for the "kid" had grown into a mature man. His large frame had accumulated an increment of fat which put him in the heavy weight class. He wore a mustache, and his clothing and general appearance were greatly in contrast to when Hardy had last seen him in his ranger garb.

But Hardy's hesitation was not of long duration. A minute's deliberation was rather short for Hardy on any occasion, and at the end of that minute he burst forth with the exclamation: "If it ain't the 'kid' and his 'gal'!" and he quickly advanced with extended hand. As the buddies of former days clasped each other's hands in the firm grip of true friendship renewed, and looked into each other's eyes, they almost forgot the presence of their families in their mutual appraisal and approval.

Finally the spell was broken by Berger exclaiming joyfully and positively: "You haven't changed a bit. You're just the same old Hardy that you always were."

By this time Mrs. Hardy had had time to change her apron,—it wouldn't have been feminine if she hadn't,—and came out to meet and greet the visitors. The youngsters, two sturdy mountain lads, not being so particular about their appearances, had preceded her and had stationed themselves just back of their father. All unmindful of their torn overalls and dirty faces, hands, and bare feet,—the result of their day's play,—they had been sizing up the occupants of the car, especially the little golden haired girl who sat up so straight and proud

beside her mother, returning their bold admiring glances with one of timidity and wonder.

Introductions were hastily given, and in a surprisingly short time they were all sitting down to a regular old-fashioned farmer's supper. The table was loaded with fresh products of the farm. How good it looked to Berger and his family! All of the vegetables, freshly plucked from the garden, had not yet wilted. Then the milk, eggs; and such hot rolls, with delicious butter and new honey!

As Mrs. Berger took a mental inventory, it occurred to her that practically everything on the table was a home product, except the spices in the chow-chow and perhaps the flour in the biscuits. But later she learned that even the flour was ground at the little mill down the valley from wheat raised on the homestead.

Berger and his wife had lived well,—having spent practically all of their married life in the city, where he had secured a very good position with one of the leading real estate firms of the West soon after their marriage; but it seemed to them that this old-fashioned meal surpassed anything they could remember. No wonder, for their systems were crying out for natural foods,—foods that had not been canned or dried or preserved, adulterated and denatured.

Supper over, the evening was enjoyably spent in visiting, Hardy and Berger entertaining with tales of their ranger life, the recital of each incident bringing others to mind. They lived over again the days of the big celebration at which old Cyclone had met his Waterloo, and Hardy had been disabled; the baile following, and all the participants therein—the young medical student, Brewster, Blair, and Dennis—and last, but not least, Mrs. Berger, then the “gal” and belle of the ball.

Brewster had been killed in the World War while gallantly leading his regiment over the top—without doubt in his old time characteristic manner. Blair had disappeared mysteriously; no one knew whether he was

dead or alive. Dennis had tired of the Wild Western life and was again occupying a position in Washington, this time in a creditable and satisfactory manner. Old Ortega was long since dead.

Mrs. Hardy could not join in the reminiscences, as she did not know many of the participants; but she enjoyed hearing the others talk of them almost as much as they did themselves. Hardy had not accepted the position which Old Mack had tendered him, but instead had asked for a furlough and gone back East; and, when he returned, Mrs. Hardy had returned with him. This may have been the explanation of the course of Hardy's thoughts when he used to look into the fire so long and steadily, all absorbed in a dream of the future. Since their return they had been busily engaged in building a home in that wilderness,—the natural resources of which had always appealed so strongly to Hardy.

Their surroundings were still crude. They were still living in the old log house which had been the product of their first necessity when they came back to settle on the homestead. Nearly everything they had was a product of their own toil and efforts and was prized accordingly. They were satisfied, yet planning for something better in the future. Many a long winter night had been joyfully spent in planning and replanning the frame house which they were to have built that summer from the product of the little sawmill down the valley. But just at the inopportune time the lumber and the mill had burned, and now they must wait until the lumber from the new mill was ready. When they did have their new home, it would be the more appreciated by reason of the difficulties and delay experienced.

Hardships? Inconveniences? Was not Mrs. Hardy experiencing many, necessarily incidental to that pioneer life—the building of a home there in the wilderness?

Yes, many! But, if she ever thought of it in that way, she did not so express herself. And her countenance beamed with pride and joy. Was she not performing

the highest mission of womanhood in making a real home for her husband and children?

God entrusted to woman the custody of future generations—thrust this responsibility upon her, and so fashioned her nature that her greatest pride and joy should be in the gift of herself to future generations,—the rearing of the young. Man cannot subdue the wilderness alone—cannot progress. He may lead, protect, provide; but to woman has been assigned the greater task; and her reward is the love of her husband, her children, her grandchildren, posterity,—Mother's Love, the foundation of the home, of civilization, of progress.

Let men and women, pleasure bent, shirk the responsibilities thus imposed upon them, and they not only lose the greatest joy in life, but pay the penalty of extinction, after one short generation of parasitical existence. A nation of such men and women is a nation of decadence, soon to be superseded by a more worthy people. Nature turns not aside. God's will cannot be evaded.

The next morning Berger was up bright and early, and went out to the corral to help Hardy with the milking. As the boys brought in the cows, he recognized old Buck as one of the horses they were riding. Buck was gray over the eyes, but as proud as ever, and Hardy hastened to speak his words of praise in his old time, back handed manner.

"Yes, that's old Buck all right. An' he's just as mean as ever. He always did consider it an insult fer me to ride him, and even now he'll get a hump in his back if he thinks he can catch me off my guard. But you know he wouldn't harm a hair o' those boys' heads. Reckon he's got some good hoss sense,—the onery old cuss."

After breakfast they all climbed into the car and rode down to "Dad's" place. The reunion can better be imagined than described. Leaving the women and children there, the men rode over the country which Berger and Hardy had so carefully explored years before. The part

west of the mountains along the river, where Ortega's enormous pasture used to be, had long since been eliminated from the National Forest as unfit for such purposes, and now supported several hundred homesteaders and their families. The country was still new, not half of the available land being tilled. But the stacks of hay and grain, the shocks of corn and the yellow pumpkins studding the fields spoke of reward for those who toiled. Many of the orchards were beginning to bear, and the ripe apples and pears hung temptingly on the trees. All of this was a revelation to Berger.

They stopped at the County Agricultural Agent's office, and there learned that surveyors were in the field looking over a proposed reservoir site and irrigation project which would water many thousands of acres below the old placeta. Stock raising was still the principal industry, but a much better grade of stock was noticeable. The forage raised on the homesteads was also supplementing the range, and making it possible to keep a larger number of cattle and sheep than formerly. There were also a number of dairies in the valley, sufficient to supply the butter and cheese required for the community and leave a surplus. The skimmed milk, corn, and alfalfa had also given rise to a new branch of the live stock business hitherto unknown in that region,—that of hog raising.

The prospect hole which the old prospector had so laboriously opened up under the extremely adverse conditions of his time, losing his life for his pains, had developed into a real copper mine, and was now in operation. A busy mining town had sprung up. The whole mountain side had been staked out by eager prospectors.

The poor Mexicans were being absorbed by the stronger race, not so much by mingling of blood as by Americanization. They were adopting the ways of the white man, many working in the new trades and occupations now open to them, their children securing instruction in the public schools with opportunities equal to those of the white children.

In the little valley where they had established their first camps they visited the Forest Ranger. He did not, however, live in a tepee tent as they had been obliged to, but instead had a cozy little house surrounded by conveniences suited to his uses,—pastures and stable for his horses, garden, even a garage and an automobile.

From him they learned that the sale of a large tract of saw timber had just been consummated,—some hundred million board feet according to the estimates of the cruisers. This meant that there would be a logging railroad and a large mill erected within a year.

The next day Berger showed a desire to get into the saddle, so he and Hardy rode up onto the Trujillo Mesa, the range which had been allotted to Hardy for his stock. As they rode about among the cattle and horses, Hardy pointed with pride to certain animals of which he was especially proud. Needless to say, the race horse with which he had "cleaned up" at the County Fair that fall came in for a full share of their consideration.

It had been evident to Hardy that Berger had something on his mind, that he had been considering some grave matter, and, as they were eating their lunch and chatting, Berger suddenly changed the subject and gave expression to the thought that was uppermost in his mind.

"Do you know, Hardy, I envy your independence?"

"Well—I am independent in a way. Reckon it would be most awful hard to starve me out, kid; but I ain't making no big lot of money."

"Money! What's money? It's what the world is going mad over,—commercialism, strife, crime, starvation, all on account of the insane desire for money,—an unnatural thing and neither food nor raiment, but intended to be a medium of exchange. What this old world needs, Hardy, is producers, not of money, but of *material* things,—foods, raiment, things that are of some use in themselves. That's the only remedy for the unrest which is so prevalent. The natural desire of man for a home is asserting itself as never before in history. I for one intend

to establish myself and own a home here in this valley, and see if I can't become self-supporting.

"And I am not going to stop at that. I am going to open up a real estate office over there in that little village. The opportunities here are wonderful, and with my connections and knowing the game as I do, I see no reason why I cannot bring the hungry home seekers in here. And I am going to do it, not so much for the financial gain to myself, as for the purpose of being a *real* producer and helping others to be, and to enjoy the pleasure of real production of material things—Homes."

"You've said something, Berger. I surely wish you success in your undertaking. But don't get it into your head that it will be all fair weather and clear sailin'. You'll have opposition a plenty. There will always be some thievin' outfit a buttin' into your little game an' tryin' to rob your home builders. Now the outfit that's a tryin' to promote that irrigation project over yonder is just a bunch o' low down thievin' outlaws. They're not satisfied with a right o' way and control over the water which they will store in their reservoir, but want their hands on every acre in the valley besides. If ever anyone needed a helpin' hand, it's that bunch o' homesteaders down the valley right now,—someone who will look out for *their* interests and rights while they are doin' the producin' act you spoke of, an' a buildin' their homes.

"You know Old Ortega and me weren't no particular close friends, Berger, and his motives and methods didn't meet with my aproval if I interpreted them right; but I've thought about it a good deal, and there is no gettin' away from the fact that his little kingdom was founded on some most awful sound underlyin' principles. In the first place he put them poor peons o' his'n to work and made 'em produce somethin'. That kept 'em out o' mischief. And then he made it most awful unpleasant for any outsider who tried to come in an' interfere with 'em in any way. 'Course he was a lookin' out fer his own interests. But his interests were theirs in a way,—like

a farmer with a bunch o' dairy cows, he realized that he must keep the wolves away from 'em and feed 'em well."

"Yes, Hardy, I think I understand you. But don't you think the Government has come to realize that it must keep the wolves away from its producers and home builders and feed them well?"

"Reckon so, kid, and it is sure ~~high time.~~ ~~But the~~ County Agricultural Agent down there whom we met yesterday has his troubles and grief tryin' to help these people same as you and I used to have when we were on District Number Five. He's doin' more and more fer them homesteaders all of the time, because he's got Uncle Sam back o' him; and they are beginnin' to realize that now. You an' him'll pull together first rate."

F I N I S





